

ART FROM THE BARK

# Carving Whimsical Cottonwood Bark Houses

---

In-The-Round

(5<sup>nd</sup> Edition)

Kathy Overcash

9/30/2020

Instructional guide on carving whimsical cottages and houses in-the-round from Cottonwood tree bark.

Copyright © 2020 by Art From The Bark, LLC, Kathryn Overcash

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying or information storage and retrieval systems—without written permission from the copyright holder.

This document is meant only for personal home use and recreation. It is not intended for commercial applications or manufacturing purposes.

## Table of Contents

Intro.....	3
Overview .....	4
Bark Houses Part 1 .....	4
Recommended Tools for Part 1 .....	4
Bark Preparation .....	5
Selecting the bark .....	5
Preparing the Bark .....	7
Temporarily Bonding the Bark .....	9
Whimsical Carving .....	11
Outlining the Features.....	11
Rough in Roof.....	12
Roof Peak, Chimney and Gable.....	12
Roof.....	14
Gable .....	15
Chimney .....	15
Posts.....	15
Roofline .....	16
Foundation .....	16
Posts Again.....	17
Doors .....	17
Windows .....	18
Separating the Bark.....	19
Inside Out.....	20
Windows .....	21
Doors .....	23

Sanding .....	23
Final Bonding.....	23
Bark Houses Part 2 .....	25
Details .....	25
Clean Up.....	25
Gables & Eaves.....	25
Roof .....	27
Chimney .....	29
Windows .....	30
Siding .....	30
Walkways and Steps.....	30
Rocks .....	31
Posts .....	31
Seams.....	32
Finish.....	32
At some point and time you have to say “ <i>I’m done</i> ”.....	35

## Intro

I’m Kathy Overcash. I’ve been carving cottonwood bark for about 15 years. I was introduced to carving cottonwood bark houses in 2006 when taking Rick Jensen’s classes. I’ve taken many classes with Rick Jensen, so some of my techniques are similar to Rick’s. Rick Jensen is “the” master bark carver and is the originator/designer of the houses “in-the-round”. He came up with the techniques to glue-up two or more pieces of bark to carve a house in-the-round. My techniques are a little different, but they stem from the methods he showed me during classes. I’ve also learned new techniques during classes that I’ve taught. Students come up with new ideas and methods too.

## Overview

Bark Houses Part 1 covers tools, selecting the bark, creating the bark blank, roughing out the roof, chimney, gable, foundation, windows, and doors. Once the outside has been roughed out, the bark will be separated and hollowed out, focusing on thinning out the windows and doors. After the doors and windows have been carved, the two pieces are permanently glued together.

Bark Houses Part 2 covers detailing the roof shingles, chimney bricks, foundation, siding, window frames, and door decor. In addition, the walkways, steps and rocks will be carved in. After all the carving is done, the final finish will be applied.

## Bark Houses Part 1

### Recommended Tools for Part 1

I use hand carving tools most of the time to carve my houses. What you can do by hand, can also be done with power carving, although that is not my preference. Power carving isn't fun for me. It creates too much dust and is noisy. If you power carve, use a good dust filtration system and a good dust mask.

You should use tools that you feel comfortable carving with. I prefer to use palm tools when I can. The following is a list of tools that I use to carve most of my houses. If you are looking for a source of tools to use, we carry most of these tools in our woodcarving store [www.carvingsandhobbies.com](http://www.carvingsandhobbies.com).

- Besides a carving glove, I use a lightweight glove to protect my non-carving hand from the rough bark while doing the rough in. Wearing a long sleeve shirt helps to protect my forearm if I'm carving a large house.
- I use a variety of v-tools.
  - I use a large 45 – 70 degree v-tool or soft V gouge to establish the foundation and roof line. The size of the v-tool will depend on size of house you will be carving.
  - I use smaller v-tools for detail work, normally 45 degree angle.
- I use a variety of U-Gouges/sweeps. I use a large sweep (1" #5 or #7) for roughing out the roof and then smaller size u-gouges for detail work.

- I also use a spoon gouge (#7 or #8) to hollow out the inside of the house. As I go deeper into the house, I start using smaller spoon gouges.
- I use a 1.25" knife blade during the roughing stage and then move to small detail knives for making stop cuts and detailing. I also use a very narrow and thin blade (1" long) when carving the post away from the exterior of the house.

## Bark Preparation

### Selecting the bark

Cottonwood bark varies in thickness and shape depending on the age of the tree and location. I used to purchase a lot of my bark from Alex Bisso. He carried some of the nicest bark for carving. He has an excellent article on The "Carvers' Companion" website on "Finding and Collecting Cottonwood Bark"

<http://carverscompanion.com/ccwom/2012/04/cottonwood-bark-part-1/>. It's a highly informative article if you want to find your own bark. There are 5 parts covering cottonwood bark. You'll have to look up the rest of his articles on Carvers' Companion website. Unfortunately, I don't live in area where I can just go out and find my own cottonwood tree bark. I must buy my bark. It gets more expensive each year. Below is a brief description of what bark I've used to carve houses with.

***Easter Cottonwood Bark:*** Eastern Cottonwood tree bark can be found in my area, Virginia and Maryland, but it's very thin. Eastern Cottonwood bark is fine for carving very tiny houses like Christmas tree ornaments. The bark texture in my area is more porous than Cottonwood bark found in the northwestern parts of the United States, so it doesn't hold the detail as well. I've found cottonwood bark in Missouri and Ohio which are thicker. From my experience the Missouri bark I have is dense and holds details better.

***Black and Plains Cottonwood Bark:*** I prefer carving with Black or Plains Cottonwood bark to carve large in-the-round houses. I have a hard time telling the difference between Plains and Black Cottonwood bark. Both types are solid and thick. From what I can tell the Plains Cottonwood bark grain is more evenly colored. The color is a little darker (reddish brown) than Black Cottonwood bark. Looking at the cross grain on the Black Cottonwood bark, it appears to be more stripped, varying from light to dark in

color. The coloring and texture may vary based on the soil and minerals where the trees grow. Both are good for carving houses. In general, Black Cottonwood trees grow in British Columbia and Montana. Plains Cottonwood trees grow in North Dakota, Eastern Montana, and Colorado.

*Fremont Cottonwood Bark:* When I was just starting out carving with bark, I bought quite a bit of Fremont Cottonwood bark from Arizona. I moved away from using it for in-the-round bark houses. I found that Fremont Cottonwood bark is irregularly shaped, thin and contains hidden loose wood fibers that make it hard to carve. I was getting all my Fremont bark from the same person (eBay), so there may be other suppliers in Arizona that have good carving bark.

*Where Do I Get My Cottonwood Bark?* My thickest bark comes from the northern states such as North Dakota, Minnesota, Alaska, Montana and Canada where both Plains and Black Cottonwood trees grow like weeds. I watch eBay closely to see if I can get some good buys, but shipping is high. Sometimes the bark I get is good, sometimes not. That's the problem of buying bark unseen. Buying on eBay can be risky when purchasing bark. Some of the bark I get have worm or bug holes in it. Bark is bark, worm holes and all. It's best if you can physically look at the bark. Check out woodcarving shows. We sell bark in our store, but we don't ship it. I've already paid shipping once. Here's a few online sources for bark.

- Western Can Cottonwood Bark (<http://www.cottonwoodbark.com/>) – (Black Cottonwood)
- Chipping Away (<http://www.chippingaway.com/>)
- Loess Hills Sawmill (<http://www.loesshillssawmill.com/cottonwood-bark.html>)

*Selecting the Bark Pieces for Your House:* For an in-the-round house, you'll need two pieces of bark or one long piece cut in half. The colors of the pieces should match as closely as possible. If the shades don't match, when bonding the two pieces together, it will be difficult to hide the joined seam. You can carve a small section of bark from the backs of the two pieces to check the color and texture. I usually try to select a long piece of bark and cut it in half for my house. Even using this method, the color can vary from one end to the other. If you can't use the same piece of bark for the

house, then try to select two pieces of bark from the same tree that are similar in texture and color.

The pieces of bark I'm using for this example are both Plains and Black Cottonwood bark. The size of the piece of bark is approximately 13" long, 3" wide, and 2.5" thick. These two sets of bark will result in houses about 7" long, 3" wide, and 5" thick. These houses are not used throughout the manual. I will be using multiple bark house blanks to demonstrate examples of cuts and other details. As I update the instruction manual, I'll be replacing some of the older images.

### Preparing the Bark

I've found that it is best to cut one long piece of bark in half before planing. The pieces don't have to be the same size either. As a matter of fact, the house looks best if one roof peak (one piece of bark) is slightly higher than the other.



Most times, the bark will be smaller at one end than the other. Determine if you want the widest/thickest ends for the roof or for the base. If you want steps, the widest ends should be at the bottom to allow for steps without having to cut into the piece too much. If the bottom of the piece is narrow, you can mount the house on a wooden base for stability.

In a perfect world, the bark will have natural bark on each end. Most of the time, I have to cut the ends. Some of the bark pieces I get are already cut when delivered.

Wear a dust mask when planing or flattening the backs of the bark. After cutting the bark in half, plane the back of each piece of bark. My husband, Dennis, uses a jointer to plane my pieces to ensure I get the flattest surface possible. Planing each piece individually will help retain as much thickness as possible, especially if the bark has a slight twist in it or one side has a bad spot.



You can also use sandpaper on a flat surface or an electric flat belt sander to sand the backs of the pieces flat. Belt sanders are great for small pieces of bark. If you plan on sanding your pieces by hand, I recommend placing your pieces in a vise and using a pull knife to flatten your pieces as much as possible to remove the excess edges. When sanding on a flat surface, move the bark in a circular or figure eight motion to evenly sand the edges of the piece. If you sand from side to side, you'll notice that the edges will be rounded. That happens from rocking the piece back and forth when switching directions. Try to avoid rounding the edges.

After sanding or planing the pieces, gather up some of the bark dust and store in a small container. The bark dust comes in handy when repairing a broken piece or filling gaps on the house.

Take the two pieces of bark that you just planed, firmly press them together and hold them up to the light to see if there are any light leaks between the two pieces. If there are, continue planing or sanding until the pieces fit tight and without any light leakage.

### *Super Gluing Loose Bark:*

If there are pieces of loose bark that you want to keep, glue it before handling the piece too much. I keep a bottle of super thin super glue (bsi Bob Smith Industries Super Thin Insta-Cure) and a bottle of accelerator (bsi Accelerator - Insta-Set) close at hand whenever I'm carving the bark. To glue loose bark, drip some super thin super glue between the cracks, press tightly together and then spray it with the accelerator. I recommend you use a clamp, not your hands to press them together. Don't glue your fingers to the bark. Sometimes the glue will have a reaction with the bark or particles on the bark and smoke a little, so don't breathe in the fumes. The glue/accelerator reaction gets hot, so don't touch it. If a piece of the exterior bark breaks loose when carving, determine if it is critical to the piece. A lot of times you really don't need it. If it isn't critical to the design, don't glue it back on. Time for a makeover!

If you have already glued the cardboard in between the pieces, don't let the super glue flow into the seam. You don't want that cardboard to get glued down with super glue. That would make splitting the pieces apart difficult. So, avoid super glue between the two pieces. If you do need to glue a piece near the seam, wait until you have split the pieces, then glue.

## Temporarily Bonding the Bark

We need to temporarily bind the two pieces together so we can establish the roof line, chimney, gable and foundation of the house. The roofline and foundation will be used as a guide to hollow out the inside of the house.

I use two methods to temporarily bond the two pieces together. Gluing the two pieces together with Elmer's School Glue and a thin piece of cardboard is the more secure way of temporarily bonding the two pieces together. I also use Adhesive Putty or UGlu to bond the pieces, although if you are not careful the pieces could come apart during carving.

### *Gluing Up*

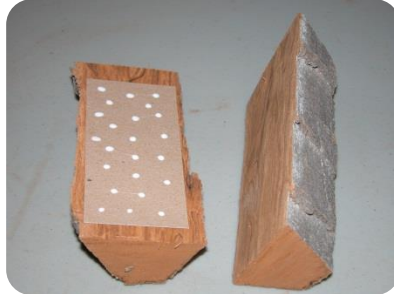
Elmer's School Glue (washable) and a thin piece of cardboard will be needed to glue up the bark. The cardboard should be thin like cereal boxes, thin cardstock, etc. If you can get a piece of cardboard that doesn't have printing (slick side) to it, the process of removing the cardboard later will be easier. Don't get it too thin that your putty knife can't get in between the two pieces.

After the planing has been completed, cut out a piece of cardboard slightly smaller than your bark. The cardboard will be glued in between the two pieces of bark. Notice that I leave a slight gap at the bottom of the bark without any cardboard. Since we won't be carving in this area, I like to leave the slight gap as an entry point for the putty knives. The gap will be used to guide the putty knives between the bark to separate the bark without damaging the bottom of the house when we are ready to hollow out the inside of the house.

I try to use cardboard that doesn't have a slick surface to it. Cardboard with a slick side usually has a picture and information about the product printed on it. The printed side is harder to glue, because when you apply glue to it, it is real slippery. If you have a slick sided cardboard piece, sand it down slightly so the glue can hold tighter to the rough surface.

To reduce the amount of glue to clean off later, apply periodic drops of glue on the cardboard instead of covering the entire piece with glue. Press that piece to the bark, leaving the gap at the bottom. Then apply glue to the other side of the cardboard and

clamp the two pieces of bark together. Let the glue dry for a few hours to ensure it is thoroughly dry before beginning to carve. Sand down the bottom of your house to ensure a flat surface.



### *Adhesive*

If I can keep from having to use the gluing technique above, I will. Using an adhesive to temporarily bind miniature houses works great. I wouldn't recommend it for large houses. Two items I like to use for the temporary binding is Scotch Adhesive Putty (removable) and UGlu. Neither one of these products will leave a residue. The Scotch Adhesive Putty can be reused, where the UGlu cannot. The putty doesn't allow the pieces to shift as much as the UGlu. I've used two sided Duct tape, but it leaves a little bit of a residue that is frustrating to remove.



Place a few pieces of the adhesive on the back of the bark. Smooth out the adhesive on the back of the bark to make it thinner. Align the two pieces of bark together and clamp the pieces together to get a tight fitting. It's normal to have a slight gap between the two pieces of bark. The gap will come in handy when taking the two pieces apart again when ready to hollow out the inside of the house.



## Whimsical Carving

Before we start carving the features on our houses, I want to explain what makes a house whimsical. When carving houses, you can add character to your house by exaggerating the house's features. The house can look like a fantasy cottage. Carve curvy lines instead of straight lines. As Rick Jensen says "No Straight Lines". All of the features on the house are uneven and exaggerated. Come up with your own fanciful style of windows and doors. The roofs and eaves on the houses are uneven, warped and swayed; posts are crooked and bent; the exterior walls bulge with different widths and lengths of siding; steps are uneven and are different sizes. If it looks architecturally correct, it's not whimsical. The more you exaggerate the features, the more whimsical the house will become.

## Outlining the Features



Depending on the bark, I use either a white chalk pencil or black Sharpie pen to outline the house features that will be carved. You can purchase the white chalk pencils in most fabric/sewing stores and craft stores. I prefer the white chalk because it is easy to wipe off if I make a mistake or if I'm not planing on carving that part

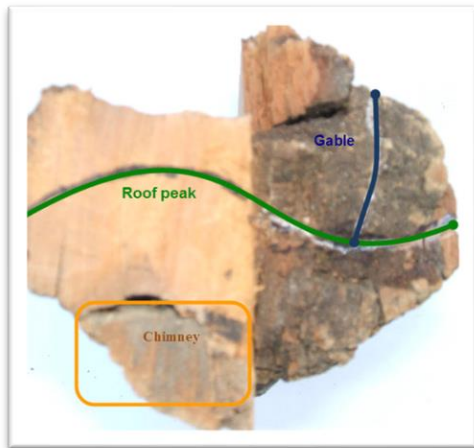


off. The disadvantage of using a Sharpie, is that if you make a mistake or change your design, you'll need to carve off the line or try to blend it into the bark. Sometimes the white doesn't show up on the exterior part of the bark so I use colored chalk or if all else fails, the black Sharpie. For the lines to show up in the photo's, I'm using a thick chisel tip Sharpie, although I don't recommend it.

## Rough in Roof

### Roof Peak, Chimney and Gable

For this project, we will rough in the roof with one chimney and one gable. On the top of the bark, draw a narrow 'S' shape from the top front center of the house to the top back center.



The 'S' shape marks the curvy roof peak (no straight lines). Depending on your piece of bark, identify and mark a place for the chimney and gable. Generally I make sure the chimney is higher than the roof peak and the gable is lower than the roof peak. The height can be adjusted when carving. Usually I put a chimney on one of the concave sides of the 'S' roof peak and the gable on the other concave side of the 'S'. The concave sides provide more room for carving the

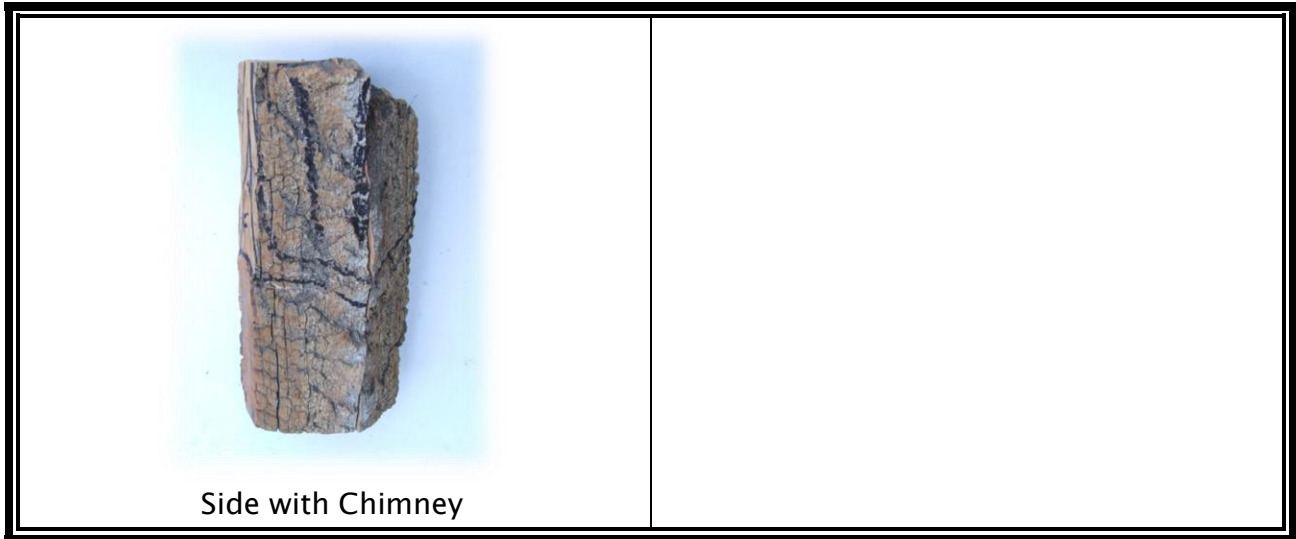
chimney and let it stand out away from the roof. In the image, the roof peak is in green, the gable is marked with blue and the chimney is circled (rectangle) in yellow.

Outline the bottom roof line edge, chimney, and gables for the house on the sides of the bark (see images below). The roof line edge will have an upper line and a lower line so that the piece will have a bark edge to the roof line. Only draw in the top of the roof line (top line). The bottom line helps in showing the thickness we want to leave for the bottom of the roof line. If you draw it in now, it will be harder to make adjustments later. We want to keep the natural bark texture in between the lines. We'll narrow and stylize the roof line and gables later. Try not to put your eaves and chimney where the two pieces come together (seam). Between the back (B) gable and the side gable, there will be a U shaped valley which narrows to the center roof peak. Make sure the roof line is not straight. The eaves should be at different heights.

Draw the outline of where the chimney will be. Keep the base of the chimney near the top of the roof line. We'll adjust it once the roof has been carved in. Stand off the chimney at least 1/8<sup>th</sup> of an inch from where the two pieces come together.







## Roof

My roofs tend to be very tall and steep in comparison to the rest of the house. They end up being around 2/3rds of the size of the house. Begin carving from the top of the roofline up toward the roof peak using a medium to large U shaped gouge (1" #5 or #7). The #7 will give you better movement than the #5. Although this is still in the rough stages, the roof should have movement or waves (uneven) within it. You need to establish how wavy the roof will be so you can gauge the depth for the gables and chimney. Notice in the first roof image below, I have marked the right hand side of the roof where I will be lowering the rooftop so the chimney will be higher than the rooftop. The last image shows the top of the roof.



## Gable

To create the gable/eave use a U-shaped gouge and create the gable roofline similar to the main roof. Be careful not to interfere with the angle of the main roofline and eaves. The first image of the roof above is the carved out gable. The last image shows how the gable looks from the top.

## Chimney

Carve the chimney a little higher than the rooftop. You may have to bring the rooftop down lower so the chimney is higher. Leave as much bark as you can on the chimney for now. Keep the base of the chimney close to the bottom of the roofline. When carving the chimney leave it wide enough so you can adjust the shape later. The chimney will not be straight up and down when we get finished. I also like to add a slight twist to the chimney. I like the chimney opening to be wider at the top than the rest of the chimney.

## Posts

Maximize the curb appeal of your whimsical house by adding an odd number of posts to your house. Decide what type of post you want to carve on your house. Mark the placement of posts before carving the roofline and foundation. Block out enough room for the post style you chose. Leave some bark on your posts if possible. The following are three possible posts you can carve. The posts are carved last to prevent accidental breakage. Just block out the area for each post.





*Single post:* Only one post is carved starting from the foundation to the roof of the house.

*Split branch post:* The split branch post is in the shape of a 'Y'.

*Tree post:* Tree posts are developed by carving a tree with roots from the foundation and using the branches for the posts.

## Roofline

Undercut the roofline using a large v-tool (45–70 degrees). Don't cut too deep at the location of any posts. The post will be set in under the roof, but not too far in. Don't carve the roof eaves on the front and back of the house. You will need that space to place the clamps during final glue up. Any decoration may get crushed with the clamps.

## Foundation

Use a V-tool (45–70 degrees) to carve the foundation. When carving the foundation, block out any posts you may want. If you are adding other objects such as people or animals, be sure to block them out as well. Carve the foundation with varying elevations or slopes which will be used for the steps and walkways later. The foundation should be carved back as far as possible to support wide steps and doorway landings. As the exterior walls are carved in, the foundation can be cut in deeper. The exterior walls should be rounded toward the foundation and roofline. Start at the center of the exterior wall and carve up and in toward the bottom of the roofline and from the center down and in toward the foundation. The exterior wall should have a slight potbelly or barrel look. The biggest mistake I see carvers make is not cutting in the foundation deep enough for the steps to be carved in. Make sure the foundation is wide enough for the little people to walk on without falling off the side of the house.



## Posts Again

This stage can be accomplished during the final stages of finishing the house if you can visually see where the exterior wall is in relation to the post. Before carving in the windows and doors, carve a small gap between any posts and walls. This helps identify the exterior depth of the front and back of the house. You can use a small thin knife or a #3 gouge. Alternatively, you can just use a small drill bit to drill through the post to mark the thickness of the post and the corner of the house. Don't drill toward the house. Don't carve the post too thin at this point. If you do carve the gap at this stage, don't apply clamps on the post during final glue up or else they may snap.

## Doors

Draw in your door frames and doors using curves if possible. Make sure you start with wide door frames. You can carve them down later. Don't carve the frame completely out, because you may need that area to place the clamps during the final gluing. Details may get crushed if you carve them in during this stage. Use a small v-tool to outline the door frame, keeping to the outside of the line you drew. Take a sharp knife and follow the v-cut you just made to create a stop-cut for the door. The v-cut will help to guide your knife and hopefully prevent your knife from veering off course with the grain. An alternate way of outlining the door frame is to use a wood burner instead of using a v-tool. Carve out around the door frame so the frame stands out away from the edge of the house. Carve the door back so that the door is set in from the frame.

Draw in any windows you may want in the door. Think about placing a panel on the door once it is carved in.

### *Closed Door*

If you have a window, drill a small hole straight through the window in the door. The drill bit should be slightly smaller than the windowpane.

### *Opened Door*

If there is a post near the door, carve the opening of the door on the same side as the post. This will give you easier access to your door with your tools. Wait until you have carved the door at an angle before drilling holes for the windows. If you are going to have a window in your door, drill a small hole in the window perpendicular to the door (90 degree angle). Be sure not to drill the hole too deep and pierce through the side of the house.



### **Windows**

Draw in the windows with curved lines. Keep the frame on the inside of the window as wide as possible without looking out of place. The narrower the interior window grids are the greater chance of them breaking. I don't carve the exterior frame until the



house is glued back together and I have the windows at the proper depth. I leave this until later because I might mess up one of the windowpanes and must rethink the design. For now, just draw in the window frame and panes to the size you want. Select a drill bit just a tad bit smaller than the windowpanes. Drill holes between the windowpanes.

## Separating the Bark

### *Splitting apart:*

Once the foundation, roofline, windows and doors and been carved in, you can separate the two pieces of bark again in order to hollow out the inside.



Use caution during this stage to prevent damaging the planed surfaces of the bark. Place the putty knife between the two pieces of bark. Use a light weight mallet to hammer the putty knife between the two pieces of bark to separate the cardboard or adhesive putty. Once the cardboard starts splitting, continue to push the putty knife through the bark. Avoid moving the putty knife back and forth against the edges of the bark to break it loose. You don't want to damage the planed edges. If it is stubborn, continue to hammer the putty knife in further and gently move the putty knife back and forth across the seam. Once it starts to loosen, you can move the putty knife around the sides and top of the house to loosen more of the cardboard. For larger pieces, you may need to add a second putty knife along side of the first one to act as a wedge. Use the same process with the second putty knife, until the pieces come loose. Once it is loose, you should be able to separate the pieces by pulling them apart by hand.

### *Clean up:*

After the pieces are separated, the cardboard or putty must be removed. The putty is pretty easy to remove just by pulling on a piece of it and dabbing it on the other piece of putty. The cardboard takes a little more effort which is the reason that I prefer not to use this method. Float the two pieces of bark, cardboard side down, into very warm water. You only need a couple inches of water to enable the pieces to float. Let the cardboard soak for about 1 minute. You should be able to pull the cardboard off the

backs with ease. If it all doesn't come off in one go, pull off what you can, soak it a little longer and try again. In my experience the side of the cardboard that had the writing on it will leave an image on your bark after removing the main piece of cardboard. Carefully remove the cardboard and glue. Don't rough up the planed side of the bark while removing the image. If it's just an image, that exists, it shouldn't affect the final glue up. Just make sure any cardboard is removed. If you have time, let the piece dry before hollowing out the back. If the back has been roughed up or if you still have some paint from the cardboard remaining, sand it down on a flat surface. Prevent rounding the edges while sanding.



## Inside Out

### *Hollow Out the Inside*

After separating the two pieces, draw a line on the back of the pieces from the roofline to the foundation. Also, draw the depth of the outside edge to the inside where you will be carving. The edge should be thick enough to glue together and have enough to carve smooth after closing up the piece again. If the two pieces are drastically different, you may have to outline the edges of the smaller piece onto your larger piece. You will use this line as the gluing edge to measure from. This will prevent you carving across the extra space and leaving a gap (hole) between the houses when glued back together.



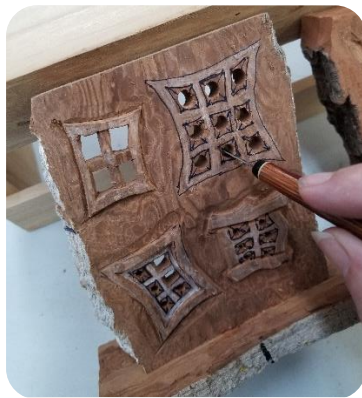
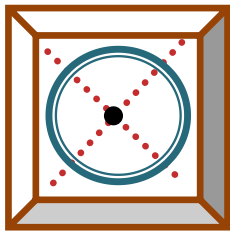
Use a scoop/spoon or a u-gouge to scoop out the bark between the bottom of the roofline and foundation to free up the windows and door as outlined below.

## Windows

I usually focus on the windows first. As you scoop out the excess bark from the back of the piece, watch for the drilled holes. Once they are visible, slow down your carving and gauge the thickness of the walls. Keep the thickness of the wall on the outside as thick as possible – about 1/4". The location of the windows can be thinner by scooping out more of the bark around the windows without widening the opening. Use a toothpick to measure the depth of the windows. Use a marker to color the tip of the marker, about 1/4". You can use the marked end to measure the depth of the windows. Place the toothpick with the marked in through the windowpane hole. When you see the edge of the toothpick on the inside of the house, place a fingernail on the toothpick at the edge of the outside window. Pull out the toothpick to see what the distance is from your fingernail to the tip of the toothpick. Don't make the window too thin. Watch the natural angle of the bark piece. Usually the outside of the bark gets narrower toward the front of the house. Don't carve straight back or you may have a blowout. Of course, you can always repair it though.

*Opening the Windows:* Draw an X across each window pane using the drilled hole as the center of the X. If you drilled the hole in the windows just a little bit smaller than the window pane, this will just be a cleanup effort. The best way to remove the bark from the window pane is to cut away the window in triangles, similar to chip carving. If you have more than two columns or rows of window panes, start with the center pane and move to the outer panes from there. Start from the center of the hole and cut along one of the lines of the triangle to the corner of the window. Do the same on the other side of the window. Chip out the remaining side. The narrow strips of wood (grids) between the panes are fragile, especially in the center where there is less bark. It's best to leave the grids as thick as possible and angle the grids toward the back. This angling affect will give the window depth at the same time giving it strength. Angle the pane so that the front of the windowpane is thicker than the back. The inside of the windowpanes will be thinner. Essentially, you are creating a vanishing point. People looking at your windows don't notice how thick the pane is because the pane vanishes out of sight to the back.





Once all the windowpanes have been cut out, use a miniature diamond file or cut an emery board to sand down the insides of the windows if needed.

You can carve the exterior frame around the window before or after gluing the pieces back together. Carve the frame around the window using a v-tool. Carve back the wall

around the window frame so the frame sits higher than the window. From the center of each window grid make a slight angle cut to the next grid joint to allow shadows.

## Doors

The inside of the door is the hardest part to carve because it is so deep within the bark. I only need to worry about hollowing out the door if I have a door window to carve or the door is in an open position. On a piece with an open door I scoop out the back until I can see the hole that I drilled in for the door. Then I start carving slower, so I don't overshoot the cut and go through the door. If that happens, just cut out the door, carve a new door from another piece, and glue it in.

I gauge my depth by putting the piece up to the light and seeing how thick the hole is. If the door is open, I start cutting away the door opening from the inside with a narrow thin knife blade and alternating the cut like a "V". I cut slowly from the back until I can see my knife blade break through the back. Instead of making the door very thin, leave it thick and angle the edges of the door on the back to give it the appearance of being thin (vanishing point). Do the same with the door window opening. The door window and be thick. You just need to angle the window opening so you can't see where it ends creating that vanishing point.

## Sanding

Optional: After preparing the windows and doors from the inside, you may want to sand the inside. Before binding the two pieces together, you may also want to wax the inside. If you do wax now, make sure the door entrance is completed. Once the pieces are glued together, the interior of the door and windows are harder to wax.

## Final Bonding

After roughing out the outside and opening the windows and doors, it's time to glue it back together. Things you'll need for the final gluing:

- Wood glue
- Clamps

When you put your two pieces back together, you may notice that the seams don't quite match up. That's because the piece of cardboard that was between the two pieces caused a slight gap and offset.



When clamping the pieces together, the two pieces may want to slip and slide on the slick glue. To help keep your alignment, test fit the two pieces together. Draw short white lines (chalk pencil) across the seam in a few places to mark where the two pieces meet.

Apply wood glue to the backs of both pieces. Spread the glue around to give it an even coating. Be sure that the edges have ample glue. Press both pieces together and align the pieces based on the white lines you drew earlier. Holding on tight to the pieces, clamp the bark together as tight as possible and in multiple places. It's helpful to have a friend hold the piece while you clamp it. The glue should ooze out of the seam. The glue actually will fill any gaps where the bark doesn't align just right. Don't wipe the glue off. We'll carve it off later. Let the bark dry for at least an hour before removing the clamps.

Rick Jensen has a method of inserting dowels into the pieces to strengthen the binding for large houses. You should read his article for more information on his method.

## Bark Houses Part 2

### Details

Once the glue has dried, carve the details of the house and landscape.

NOTE: Leave the posts for last.

### Clean Up

- Since the two pieces may not quite match or align perfectly when gluing them together, you'll need to carve off the glued seam to even them up and to remove any excess glue.
- Shape the chimney. Leave as much bark on the chimney as possible. When shaping the chimney, consider carving the chimney slightly twisted, curved and wider in some places than others. The top of the chimney can be carved uneven as if the bricks have been breaking and fallen off. I like my chimneys to be wider at the top than the bottom, similar to a funnel.
- Bring out the door and window frames by cutting back the wood along the frames.

### Gables & Eaves

Carve the eaves of the gable providing curves and movement on each eave. Start out by keeping the eaves thick and then carve them down slowly until you have your desired shape. Recess the gable's interior facing (between the eaves), but leave the facing about 1/8" to 1/4" thick for the eave pattern. Carve in the gable's bottom brace between each eave. Carve a pattern, like a "Y" or tree shape, in the interior facing of the eave and above the bottom brace. Sand the gable opening and design the best you can. You can use a diamond Dremel bit or files to sand in the corners.

Texture the background between each eave and pattern. I prefer using a small double ball stylus for texturing. The stylus provides a nice clean look.

Since it's difficult to clean up the small areas between the patterns, adding texture will help hide rough cuts in the corners. I also use various leather working tools to provide texturing.



## Roof

Before detailing the roof, use a large u-gouge to provide movement and body to the roof. Don't leave the roof flat. I use to sand the roof to look at movement. I quit doing that because I'm just going to carve over it again. I leave all the tool marks on it and go from there.

### *Smooth Roof Top*

It's okay to leave the roof smooth instead of adding shingles or other texture. If you decide to leave the roof smooth, you may want to sand it smooth and removing the tool marks. If you have a lot of grain variations, this look will be appealing. Leaving the roof with a rough tool cut is okay too.



### *Shingled Roof Top*

I'll be covering two ways to carve shingles on the roof, row shingles and staggered shingles.

#### Row shingles:

The easiest way to carve shingles is to carve a row of shingles at a time. Use your v-tool (45 – 70 degree angle) to carve a curvy line across the top of the roof to create your first row of shingles. Use the v-tool to carve a vertical line for each shingle. Use your knife to shave off one of the edges of each shingle to give it an overlapping appearance on the other shingle. Continue this process until you reach the gray bark area at the bottom roofline.

## Staggered shingles:

Carving each shingle individually will give the roof a more whimsical look. I find the best way to carve the shingles using this method, is to draw a guideline for each row of



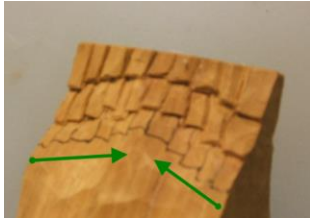
shingles (see white guideline in image). Start carving shingles from the top of the roof and work your way down. I only draw one row at a time, otherwise it gets too busy. It's helpful to place a tick mark at the edge of the roof for each line so you can get the sizes of the rows "about" the same. Once you have your initial line drawn you carve each shingle one at a time from both ends, meeting at the center. When carving the shingles from left to right, the right edge of each shingle is higher than the shingle

beneath it. This method creates a shadow effect and provides a layered affect. Do the opposite when carving the shingles from right to left. Use the same technique with the gables and meeting the two roof plains in the valley. Carving in the curved valley between eaves is a little tricky and should be drawn out first.

Carving Staggered Shingles: From the left edge of the roof, create each shingle by carving the bottom of the shingle first. Make sure you turn/tip your V-tool downward (see images below) so that you get a flat appearance on the bottom of shingle. After you carve the bottom of the shingle, carve the right side of the shingle. Start at the bottom of the shingle and carve upward with the grain of the bark. Once the shingle has been carved, clean up the area around the shingle to remove tool marks from the V-tool. You want a smooth surface below the shingle for the next row of shingles and to right for the next shingle to be carved. Continue this process to about the center of the piece. Then start from the right and carve to the center. The high part of the shingle from carving from the right will be on the left of the shingle. Turn the V-Tool to the left to create the shingle edge.



To prevent the shingles from creating an inverted “V” shape pattern, as you see in the upper image on the left, drop or stagger some of the singles below the guideline. This gives it a staggered appearance.



To make the shingles look more dynamic, undercut the edges of some of the shingles. Shoop out some of shingles where the edges appear to look turned up and uneven.

### Chimney

Each brick on the chimney can be carved one at a time or a row at a time. I usually combine both these methods to speed up carving the chimney bricks. Draw lines for each row from the top of the chimney down to the roof. Don't make your lines exactly straight. Make some of the lines crooked so the bricks look like they've shifted. You may want some of the bricks to go up and down across a couple rows. Drawing the lines will help you gauge the width of your brick rows from top to bottom. The rows shouldn't be exactly the same height, but this method will prevent you from carving rows that are extremely larger or extremely smaller than the rest of the rows. I use a miniature v-tool to carve each brick. I normally start carving the bricks from the bottom of the chimney and work my way to the top, one row at a time. When carving the individual bricks, inset some of the bricks, carve some at an angle like they are slipping, and carve some sticking out further than the other bricks. Vary the sizes and shapes of the bricks.





After all of the bricks are carved in, use a spoon gouge to create the hole in the top of the chimney. You can also power carve a hole in the top of the chimney with a round bur. When using the bur, keep the bur moving. Don't try pushing the bur into the chimney like a drill bit, because the bur will grab and kick back. The hole doesn't need to be too deep. Once a hole has been created use a butane torch to burn the inside of your chimney. Matches and fireplace lights can work, but not quite as good. Be close to water in case your bark house catches fire! Tap out any burning chars. Black shoe polish will be used later to touch up any areas that did not turn black.

### Windows



To add a shadow to the window grids, set back the windowpane grids. Begin carving from the center of each grid to the main frame slightly deepening the cut on the side of the frame. This technique will provide shadows for the windows.



### Siding



I use a mini v-tool to carve in the vertical siding. Carve each siding panel with curves and varied widths. No straight panels either. Use a stylist pen with a small head to create the nail holes. Stager the nail holes so that not all the boards have nails. If every board has nails in it, the piece will get too busy and distract from the overall piece. You can also use the stylist to press in the line for the siding in hard to reach areas. If you notice that part of your house is a lot lower than most of the rest, you can carve in a brick foundation on the low portion to help even it up.

### Walkways and Steps



Draw the location and width of the steps. Use a v-tool (70 degree angle) to carve the walkway and steps around the foundation of the house. It's easier to start carving the steps at the highest level and carve down to the lower areas. After making the v-cut, carve the exterior corner of

the step into a curve so that the steps are viewable at different angles (rounded steps). The steps should be different sizes and should be larger than normal for the “real” house. Just remember to make them as wide as possible. The little people who live in the house need to be able to walk down the steps without falling off the edge. If you are carving spiraling steps, you will have to cut into the side of the house to give the steps depth. Yeah, it may look like the little people may have to stoop over in some spots so they don’t bump their heads. They’ll get used to it.

The steps are cut across the grain. As a personal preference, I sand the steps down with an Emery board and finish with 400 to 600 grit Abranet mesh to get rid of the rough surface. It gives them a cleaner, smooth surface like the little people have worn down the surface from walking across them so often.

## Rocks



When carving the boulders/rocks, make them big and rugged. Avoid layering rocks like blocks. For a rugged look, the rocks should be different sizes with some deeper than others. I like to use burnishing tools to help provide a rugged surface

for the rocks. You can use a larger round stylus as a burnishing tool. Press and rub the rock surface with your tools to create the rock texture. Undercut the rocks to give them depth. In addition of rocks, you can incorporate block walls into your carving.



## Posts

Because the posts are so narrow, carve the posts last. Use an extremely thin knife to



remove the bark between the corner of the house and the post. Carve away from the house so your post sticks out as far away from the house as possible. Like



everything else, the post should be crooked. Leave some bark on the post if possible. You can also carve in knot holes by scooping out a bit of



the bark on the post. The posts are the most vulnerable piece on the house. People tend to hold the piece around the center and clamp their hands around the posts to get a good grip. Make the posts as thick as possible without them looking abnormal ... as if anything is normal on a whimsical house!

### Seams

To blend the seams on the bark, I rough up the area using a micro u-gouge or v-tool. I use a stylist and burnish the surface to blend it in with the rest of the bark surrounding it.

### Finish

I use to “Meltonian” Boot & Shoe Cream Shoe Polish to finish my houses. Now that Meltonian has been discontinued, I use other shoe creams. I use Kelly’s, Club Classic, and Moneysworth shoe creams. You can usually find the shoe creams at shoe repair stores. As an alternate finish, Howard Feed-N-Wax can be used to finish your house.

*Sharpie Marks:* Before applying the finish, blend in any Sharpie pen marks left on the bark by lightly applying 400 to 600 grit Abranet mesh across the pen marks. Sanding the pen marks will help blend it into the natural color of the bark.

*Bleach:* On the areas that you want the carved area to look like the same color as the exterior of the bark, you can use 2 part bleach to 1 part water to bleach out the exterior. Also, setting the house in the sun while it dries will help. This is a good method to cover up where the two pieces were joined.

### Applying Polish

I put a coat of “Neutral” shoe polish on the carved portion of the bark. The shoe polish looks white until it is applied and worked in. Depending on the area that I have to cover, I use a small, medium, or large stiff bristle paint brush. I use the small brush to get into tight areas and inside the windowpanes. Don’t put too much polish on at one time. Make sure that all the white is worked in. Don’t let it cake up in cracks. Caked wax will dry a nasty yellowish color. You shouldn’t be able to see any white when it is worked in good enough. I avoid putting any polish on the outside layer of the bark. I prefer leaving the outside bark natural.

Turn your piece upside down to make sure you covered all the areas with the polish.

## *Buffing*

Once the polish has had a little time to dry, I buff it with a large shoe brush. For hard to reach places I use a ladies knee high nylon stocking. I slide the nylon over my hand and buff gently. If I can't get the nylon in hard to reach areas, I take an extremely soft paint brush and buff in the tight area. After that coat has been buffed, I put on another coat (total of 2 coats) of neutral polish and buff again.

## *Antiquing*

Antiquing is a little more difficult. I use two different methods to antique and add color to my carvings. The first one that I'm currently using is pastel chalks. The second one is done with various colors of shoe cream.

## *Chalk Pastels*

After the final finish has been applied, I touch up the piece using pastels. I have a pack of pastel chalks that has multiple shades of different colors. I found that this method works better than continuing with the shoe cream. I use a small stiff paint brush to create a powder from the pastel color. Then I apply a light dusting to the piece and rub it into the wax. Wipe off any loose powder. Here are some of the things I give a touch of color to using the pastels.

- Seams: I add a touch of light gray pastel first and then come back with a speckling of the darker gray. I don't cover up the entire light gray. I want to just give it different color tones to match the original bark. Sometimes, I add a touch of the gray to the rough bark to help with the blending.
- Trees: If I have trees on my piece, I add a light dusting of the dark green, then brush off any excess dust. I follow that up with a touch of lighter green and sometimes a touch of yellow. I use a light dusting of brown on the tree trunk and roots followed up with a touch of gray.
- Chimney: On the chimney, I add a very, very light dusting of brick red or a brownish red shade. The color helps bring out the chimney.
- Roof: I add a touch of dark gray or black to the edges of some of the shingles to give it a worn appearance. I don't like my houses to be real dark, so I add it sparingly. Under the roof eaves and roofline, I like to add a touch of light gray where the roofline meets the siding. Just a touch to heighten the shadow!

- Doors and Windows: If my door and window frames are designed as tree branches, I add a touch of dark brown (darker than the house) and then add a little bit of gray on the edges to enhance the shadow.
- Siding: On the siding, I like to randomly add a touch of dark gray between the siding boards. I don't do it to all the boards.
- Steps: I may add a little of the light gray between the front edge of the step and the back of the next step to add some shadow. I also like to add just a touch, here and there, between the steps and the bottom of the siding.
- Rocks: You can use different pastel earth tones to add a little color to the rocks. I use different browns and grays, buffing between each color.

### Shoe Cream

I use black or dark brown shoe polish to antique portions of the houses like the shingles, rocks, windows, etc. You have to be careful with the black. You want to use a small brush and only work on a small section at a time. After adding a small amount of black, work it in with a toothbrush. Don't let the black set on the piece long or you will have a hard time getting it off. You should practice this technique on a scrap piece of bark before applying to your main piece. The polish is water soluble, so you can use a warm damp rag to rub off any unwanted polish. If you do this, it will also remove the base polish. After the bark dries, reapply the base wax.

On my trees, I apply brown and work it in with a toothbrush. The green is easier to work with than the black. I also use green wax if I have leaves. Buff one more time and you're done.

### *Alternative Finish: Feed-N-Wax*

Use Howard Feed-N-Wax as an alternative finish. Apply the Feed-N-Wax polish with a clean rag. Make sure you get the polish into all the grooves and cracks on the house. You may want to use a small paint brush to apply the polish into any tight areas. Wipe off any excess polish. After about a half hour, buff the piece with a soft cloth. Using Feed-N-Wax will result in the bark turning a darker shade of color than when using shoe cream.

You might consider using a combination of methods. For example, use Feed-N-Wax for areas you may want to be darker than the house, like the rocks and chimney. Use your imagination!

**At some point and time you have to say "*I'm done*".**