

# Carving up time in the “golden years”

by Nadenia Newkirk

Grey haired, crew-cut Tom Olds, appearing much younger than his 72 years, contends that "a retired person without a hobby is terribly handicapped."

For Olds, retirement preparation began in childhood when he took up "whittlin'."

Olds likes to show people the whittled wooden chain and the intricate cage enclosing wooden balls, both of which were carved from one piece of wood.

Though these pieces were done years ago, one can look at the man and back again at the carvings and be amazed at the precision and patience which must have accompanied the work. This helps to explain why, when he decided to one day, Tom Olds was able to learn to make violins.

## Violin maker

When Old's twin daughters progressed in their music enough their violin teacher wanted them to have good violins. Proud of his daughter's accomplishments, and since he couldn't afford to walk out and spend the \$700 or so required for a high quality instrument, Tom Olds made them himself.



Tom and Venetia Olds: happy and mutually supportive in their busy retirement

After an apprenticeship under master violin maker John Chapin in San Francisco and hundreds of hours of slow, exact labor (one violin he said took 300 hours), he ended up with six violins. Some of the special tools he even had to make himself.

Today his daughters each have two, a friend has one and the sixth is mounted on the wall of the mobile home which he shares with his wife of 20 years, Venetia.

No more violin making today, however. Now, even with a left thumb nearly useless from polio, Tom Olds has a new wood carving project.

## Box of birds

With obvious pleasure he opens up his box of birds and one by one he picks them out and places each carved and painted wooden bird gently, lovingly on the table. At the same time he names each one and the habitat in which it is found. Before him there is a display of the work which keeps him, at 72, not only occupied in his retirement, but productive as well.

Twelve years ago Olds, a machinist by profession, retired in Sonoma County with Venetia. Among their many contributions to the county has been exhaustive help in starting the local Madrone Audubon Society, and they continue to support its conservation activities.

And that's where the birds come in. Some 70 different species of birds and some wild animals are fashioned by Tom's still nimble fingers into decorative pins, tie tacks, bolo ties and necklaces. After cutting the pattern out with a jig saw (which sits in his well-equipped work shop), he sands the bird shapes, punches in the eyes and finishes them with water base paint colors and a hard coat of polyurethane varnish. All proceeds from the sale of these birds, for which he asks \$3 and \$4.50, are turned over to the local Audubon Society. Currently Olds is able to deposit \$200 a month from sales all over the world.

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## Audubon education

This labor of love, explain Venetia and Tom, helps Audubon further its conservation education goals. For example, 24 gift subscriptions to the handsome Audubon magazine (valued at \$12 each) were given to local city school libraries. Other funds provide scholarship opportunities for teachers and forest rangers to attend conservation school and return to teach conservation principles and practice in the community. Conservation education, Olds believes, is becoming more crucial as wildlife and its natural habitat are constantly being threatened and destroyed.

Before his doctor ordered Tom to slow down, he did extensive lecturing on wildlife and birds, Venetia acting as his scheduling manager. And, he says, before fund cutbacks obliged the library to return their rented nature films to the distributor, the couple showed them as entertainment to the infirm in local rest homes.



Olds at home with “homemade” violin

## "Taxi service"

"If you look around there's always somebody who needs a little help," says Venetia Olds who also is retired after working in the insurance field. As well as being an active member of the Audubon Society board and the Bennett Valley Grange sewing circle which sews for overseas orphans, she lends her services to the otherwise homebound older folk of Colonial Park mobile home park where they make their home.

Her "taxi service" enables people like her 85-year-old neighbor, who can no longer obtain a driver's license, to do simple errands like going to the bank or the market.

Tom explains that "We're so busy, you never saw such busy people." They are even too busy, they explain almost proudly, to get involved in the activities organized at the mobile park. Even in spare moments around the house Venetia continues knitting on a miniature blanket to be sent to an overseas orphan.

## Conservation as religion

Is Tom Olds a religious man? "Conservation is my religion," he declares. His personal doctrine is almost poetic: "Preservation of God's creation and protection of his creatures is of divine importance." That plus the Golden Rule.

Obviously the combination is working for Tom and Venetia Olds who upon "retiring" are busy living and helping to improve life for others.

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