

Ozark Onyx Cutter

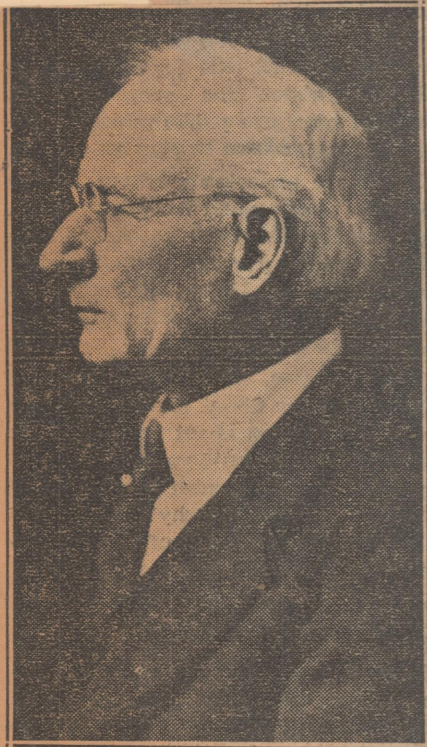
Native Materials of

Ozarks Have Given

Eureka Springs
Craftsman Continual

Inspiration for

Many Kinds of
Handiwork.



Charley Stehm,
Eureka Springs craftsman.

Art and industry are combined in the personality of Charley Stehm of Eureka Springs, making him one of the most skillful and versatile craftsmen of the Ozarks. His principal work is onyx cutting and, although he formerly had many competitors, he now is the most active in the section. Also he makes pottery, wood carvings, cuts agate and does some metal work. Formerly he did much leather work, and before pearls in Ozark rivers became so scarce he worked them into beautiful ornaments.

Many of his machines and tools he makes himself. He has made a machine for cutting agate, a contraption for putting shellac on wooden trinkets which he carves, and parts for other machines and tools. This practice he started early in life and when he was seven won a prize at school in Des Moines, Ia., for a saw buck and saw.

He gathers all his materials from territory adjacent to Eureka Springs. Onyx comes from a cave about five miles from Eureka Springs. He gathers it with T. J. Walker, a retired onyx cutter who still does some work at his home in Eureka Springs. At the end of the day Mr. Walker's son meets the old men a half mile from the cave, and takes them and their stone back to town. Clay for the line of Ozark pottery which he started making in 1924, Mr. Stehm gets from near Eureka Springs, where there is a large seam. He colors and fashions it by hand. He finds all the woods he wants and has a wide choice of some of the most beautiful varieties. Black walnut, cherry and plum are the most useful to his carving of crucifixes, initial buckles and slides, bookmarks, lamps, bracelets, gavels, paper knives and other novelties. But

he has made a collection of other rare and beautiful Arkansas woods.

Onyx is a limestone formation, and is found in caves in the form of stalagmites and stalactites. The outside looks like common limestone, but the inside is so veined and colored that one never knows what pattern he might find when he cuts into the piece. Some have patterns resembling flowers, fairies, devils, butterflies, trees or landscapes, which one can perceive with very slight imagination. The same pattern often will

not run throughout the piece, but will change. From one piece of onyx which Mr. Stehm cut he got four particularly beautiful pieces, all different. The first showed a picture of a butterfly over a blade of grass. On the next cut, not much farther down, the butterfly had changed and looked like a rose on a stem. The next cut showed a castle on a hillside, the approach and the moat. The last cut showed a ship at sea going into a big swell. All were made into brooches. Another piece yielded a picture of Niagara Falls. In one piece appears a picture of "The Narrows," one of the famous scenes of Eureka Springs where the railway track goes between two great stone bluffs.

These pieces are some of the most beautiful and beloved cut by Mr. Stehm and are not for sale, although he is glad to show them to visitors to his shop. They are to be given to his nieces when he passes on.

Mr. Stehm began his onyx-cutting career in 1889 in Eureka Springs. On a vacant lot where the Basin Park hotel now stands, two men had set up a tent and were cutting onyx. Seeing his brother Henry cutting a piece, Charley offered to improve it for him. But Henry was satisfied with his job and told Charley to get a piece of his own. He did, and turned out such a good piece of work that J. T. Caldwell, superintendent of the Eureka Springs Onyx Company, which had a shop near where the depot is now located in Eureka Springs, offered him a job. They were to furnish the stone and tools and give him three out of every five pieces he made. On one division Mr. Caldwell selected a piece which later became valuable and famous. Neither of the men noticed the "pattern" in the stone, but when Mr. Caldwell wore it as a watch fob, another onyx cutter, T. J. Walker, turned it over and pointed out that it bore the image of a woman's head. The piece was then bought by Pell and Dideca of St. Louis, who saw its resemblance to Martha Washington. It was mounted in diamonds, put on a chain and valued at \$7,500, the stone alone at \$2,500, it was reported in an article in the St. Louis Globe-Democrat of January 29, 1911.

Shortly after that Mr. Stehm opened his first store in a little brick building where the Basin Park barber shop now stands. In 1902 he bought the Ferguson onyx factory and in 1920 bought the Tom Walker shop.

He is methodical and businesslike. He will not leave the shop if there is the last thing to be done. He times himself on each piece of work and keeps a written record of it. It takes about four hours to cut and polish a piece of onyx for a brooch.

Mr. Stehm was born in Des Moines in 1869 and moved to Kansas with his parents at the age of nine. A few years later, because of his mother's health, the family moved to Eureka Springs and Charley, at the age of 13, went into business for himself as a messenger boy and salesman of peanuts, popcorn and newspapers. When he was 16 he learned the barber trade and also did some carpenter work. For a time he prospected and mined.

He enjoys the many tourists who come to Eureka Springs and likes to show them the things he has made. He has a large stock for sale.

Even at the age of 69, every day he has new ideas for making a new article or improving an old one. He knows much of the wealth of materials around him and ideas for their use come to him continually.