

Ridgway Chainsaw Carvers Rendezvous Attracts Artisans from Around the World

BY VANESSA ORR

Having lived in Alaska for seven years, and having worked for a short while at a logging company, I'm pretty jaded when it comes to what a chainsaw can do. But there's a huge difference between wielding a power tool to cut down trees and using a chainsaw to create one-of-a-kind artistic masterpieces, which is what visitors to Ridgway, PA, will find when they attend the Chainsaw Carvers Rendezvous.

Held for a full week in February, the Chainsaw Carvers Rendezvous attracts nearly 200 carvers from around the world. This year's event, which was held from Feb. 16-23, brought in artisans from Pennsylvania, New York, Washington, Connecticut, Kentucky and Texas, as well as Canada, Germany, Denmark and Aranded Neira, Chile. Started as a backyard gathering 14 years ago by organizers Rick and Liz Boni, the Rendezvous has grown to become the largest event of its kind in the world.



There's nothing quite like wandering through the historic town of Ridgway, known as 'The Lily of the Valley,' and hearing the whine of hundreds of chainsaws as artists carve everything from bears to benches to birds in flight on-site. You can watch what was once a plain log come alive as an artist slowly coaxes his vision from the wood; what was once a chunk of lumber becomes transformed into a majestic bald eagle or fire-breathing dragon. And while bears are predictably the biggest sellers, there's

something for everyone who loves chainsaw art, from \$15 doorstops to magnificent \$5,000 totems with animals carved so realistically that they seem to be alive.

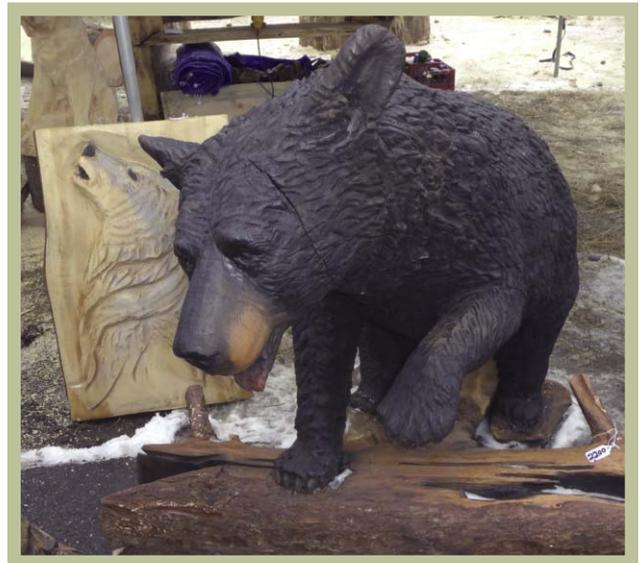
While you can buy the carvings throughout the week (and if you see something you love, I suggest you snap it up), the big draw is the auction on the last Saturday, during which pieces donated by the carvers are sold to support the running of the Rendezvous. The action can get pretty hot and heavy and the prices can get fairly steep; even

though the event is noncompetitive, there's certainly a lot of cachet that comes from being the carver that raised the most money through his or her artwork.

One of the things that's really cool about the event is that it is held right in the middle of downtown Ridgway, so if you need a break from the frigid temperatures, you can stop in at local restaurants (I suggest Jordan's Bar and Grill on Main Street) and grab a quick sandwich or microbrew. The people in town are unbelievably friendly, and have no qualms about serving sawdust-covered tourists.

In addition to viewing all of the carvings, visitors can also take a horse-drawn carriage ride through the town of Ridgway to view a number of historic buildings, including homes that were built between 1855 and 1917. There is also a walking map available, and while I enjoyed seeing all of these beautiful houses, I would suggest maybe taking this walk in spring or fall when it might be a little warmer.

This year for the first time, the Rendezvous also featured a pyrotechnics display down beside the Clarion River which was really pretty impressive. Again, bundle up tight; the show doesn't take place until after 8 p.m. and this year, temperatures were pretty severe, but there was a nice sense of camaraderie as everyone gathered around the chainsaw-carved burn barrels that were both warm



and beautifully designed.

Depending on when you choose to go to Ridgway, you can also stop in at some nearby towns to see what they have to offer. I stayed in St. Mary's, PA, which was only about 15 minutes from Ridgway. In addition to a number of restored B-n-Bs (I highly recommend the Cozy Afghan Bed and Breakfast, which still has all of its original woodwork as well as an extremely friendly staff), the town is also home to the Straub Brewery, home of the Eternal Tap, which has been flowing since 1872. They offer tours during the week, so try to start your weekend early if you can.

Benezette, PA, is slightly less than an hour from Ridgway, and is home to the eco-friendly Elk County Visitor Center, which opened in 2010. This is a great place to take your kids to enjoy interactive exhibits, a 4-D immersive story theater and a hands-on Discovery Room. If you're ever wanted to know anything about elk, from what the animal's pelt feels like to what elk sausage tastes like, this is the place to learn. You can also pick up an elk scenic driving map to see if you can find some herds to view on your own; chances are, you'll get the chance to see at least a few of the majestic animals within a very short distance.

To learn more about all of the things to do and places to visit in Ridgway and surrounding areas, visit the PA Wilds website at www.pawilds.com.