



# SCRIMSHAW



## Art on Ivory

By Kathy Landon, Tony Borland, and Billy Ward.

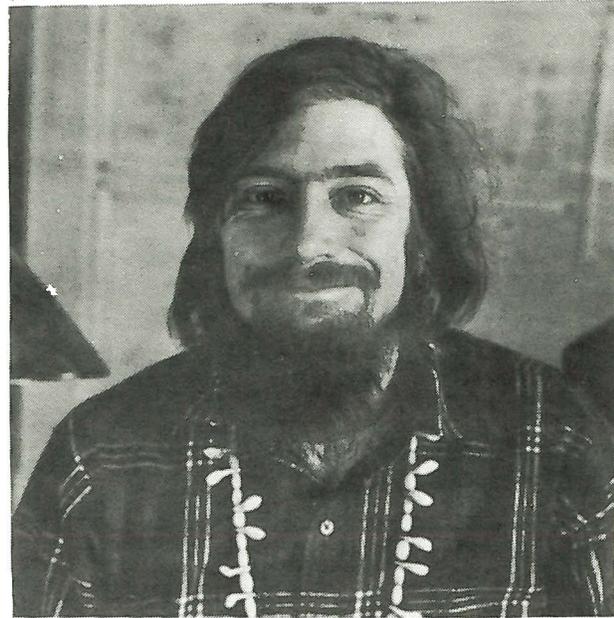
"Sitting around not doing anything." This was one of the drawbacks of being a Yankee Whaleman. As a result of this, "sitting around", Scrimshaw began.

In the early years of our country when whaling was a huge industry, whalers had to go no farther than their own coast line. After many years the whales began to diminish. So, the whalers had to go greater distances to capture their prey, thus often making a six month trip into a six year voyage.

Sailors, having all this leisure time in between the sightings of whales, looked for something to occupy their time. They had no commercial materials, so they had to use the raw materials at hand, which was whale bone and the ivory teeth from the whale. Using these materials the sailors started a new American Art form.

When asked to define Scrimshaw, Bill Higbee gave us this explanation, "There are about thirty definitions: I found the best to be the carving of bone or ivory or the making of things from whale products - like whale bone and ivory - also coconut shells, hard wood, whatever they could get their hands on."

During the American Revolution, many American whalers were captured, and subsequently taught the art of scrimshaw



to the English. Scrimshaw then is one of the few folk arts native to America.

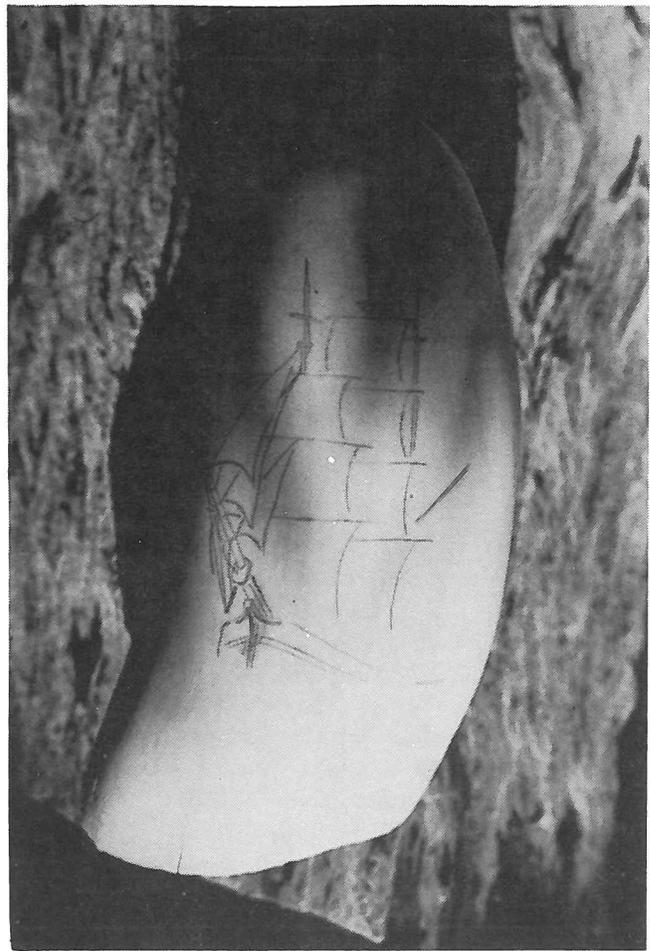
Whaleman "made some stuff (carvings) that weren't actually Scrimshaw, but they were pretty amazing." For their girl friends and wives they made things like yarn holders that folded out so they didn't need anyone to help them put the yarn on balls.

The majority of carvings that were sent home to the whaleman's family were done on useable tools. As the whaleman sat and waited for a whale to show they'd often pick up a bone or tooth and start to work on it. Their first step would be to clean the ivory by sanding it repeatedly, until it was flat enough to be workable. Then they began the real work -

tacked it on to their ivory and traced it by means of using a pin. Then they took to the real carving.

After the carving was finished it was inked and polished. The initial carving work had to be inked to make carving show up. This was done by intricately carving a picture. How they went about this varied depending on the talents of the carver. Some got a picture out of a magazine, spreading Indian Ink over the carving and rubbing the excess ink off, leaving ink only in the carved area. The product was then rubbed with a soft cloth, leaving a finished Scrimshaw.

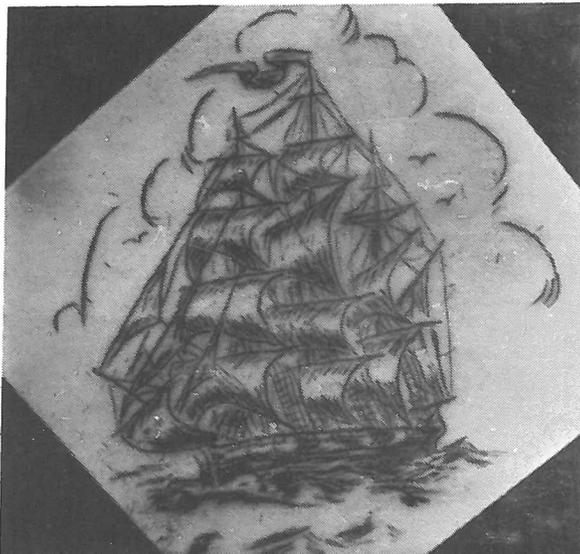
"I use many different kinds of ivory," says Bill, "usually any ivory that I can get my hands on." When Bill Higbee first started Scrimshaw he had trouble getting ivory, so he would compensate by using flattened cow horn or deer or elk antler. Until he discovered that ivory piano keys were useable. Ivory he found, is just about the best thing to carve on. "I used to go junkin' in dumps and look for old pianos for the ivory keys - Nowadays piano keys are plastic."



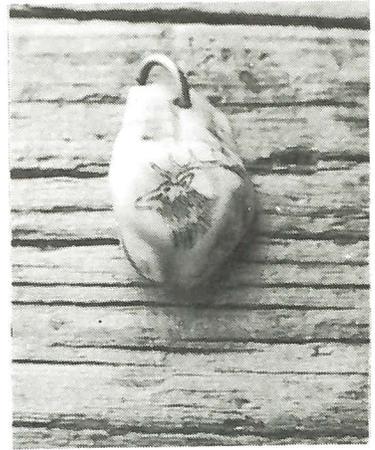
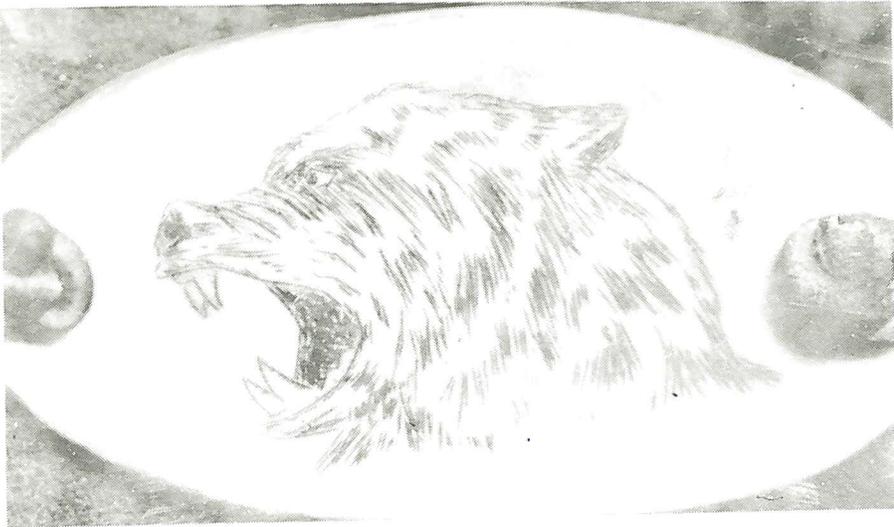
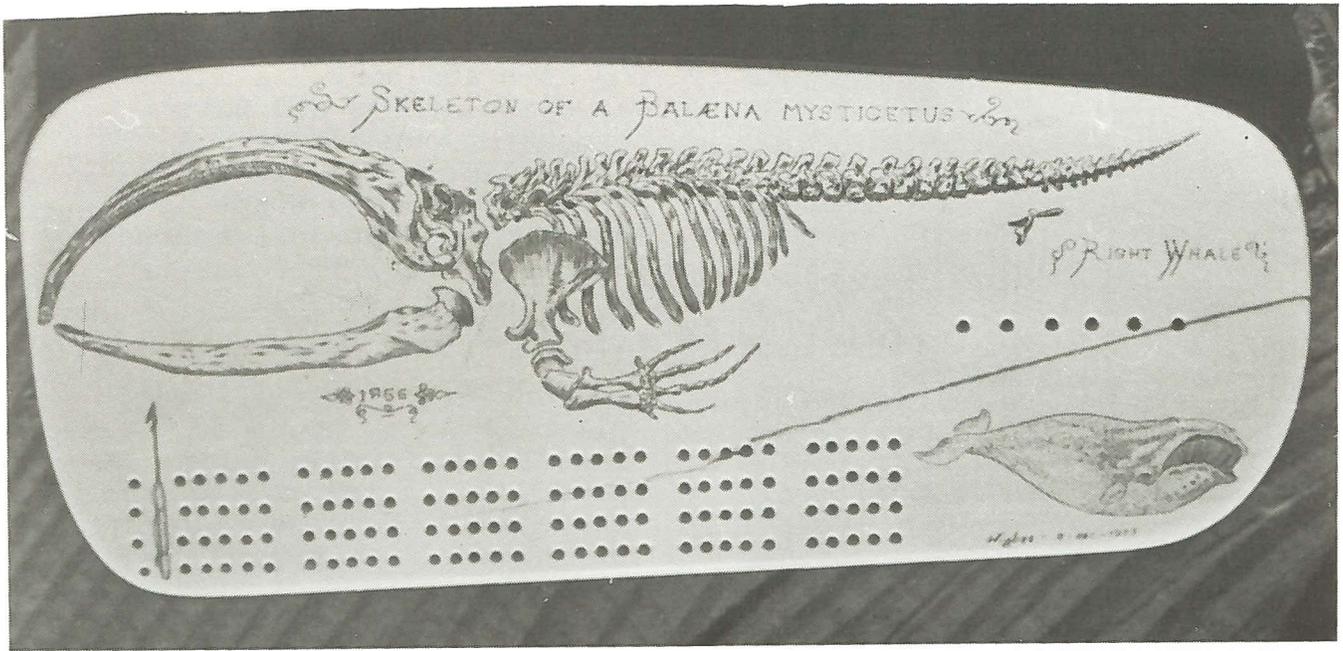
As he came to know other artists he came in contact with other kinds of fine ivory, whale bone and elephant tusk. Bill often does art on a whale's tooth or other pieces of ivory and gives it away in exchange for more ivory. Not very profitable, but this helps circulate his work, so that when others see it they are impressed.

There are many different kinds of ivory, like whale's teeth, elk teeth, elephant tusks, walrus teeth, etc. "I like whale teeth the best because they're easier to work with and they turn out nicer."

The softest kind of ivory is a boar's tusk. "They're not much good for anything," Bill commented. The hardest kind of ivory is a hippopotomus tusk. About these Bill says, "they're as hard as steel."



A ship carved on a piano key.





A "Bobcat" Scrimshawed on ivory by Bill Higbee.

The cost of ivory is pretty expensive, for example, a small elephant's tusk can be bought for three hundred dollars. Smaller pieces may be bought; they're easier to work with and money may be made out of the deal also. Bill makes a lot of necklaces out of small slices left over from other carvings. He does earrings from left overs too, and charges forty to a hundred and fifty dollars per set. This may seem high, but Bill does beautiful work and the cost of ivory alone is relative to the price of the finished product.

"I get cramps in my fingers from carving long periods of time, so I use a miniture handle made out of the head of a piece of elephant ivory, so it strictly fits my hand." He uses many tools for carving. Each one is designed to carve different size lines in the many types of bone.

"I use a triangular needle made for me by a metal en-

graver; that's for dot work. Then I use this (a number twelve scalpel.) for carving horn and bone. I also use dental tools and bits to make my own blades. A lot of times I'll use a carbon steel rod and shape it into a blade--it just depends on what I want, if I want a fine line, a heavy line, or a thick line."

Some of the things Bill does will take forty hours of carving, but before he carves he spends time doing studies of the object. He does five or six studies just trying different techniques of shading before he begins to carve his picture on the ivory.

When asked how many people there are that do Scrimshaw, Bill said, "Well, twenty, maybe thirty in the United States, but most of them don't do it seriously; they only do it as a hobby." There are four known people in Colorado that do Scrimshaw: one in Aspen, and three in Steamboat; including Bill Higbee. Most scrimshanders in the U. S. are found on the east coast.

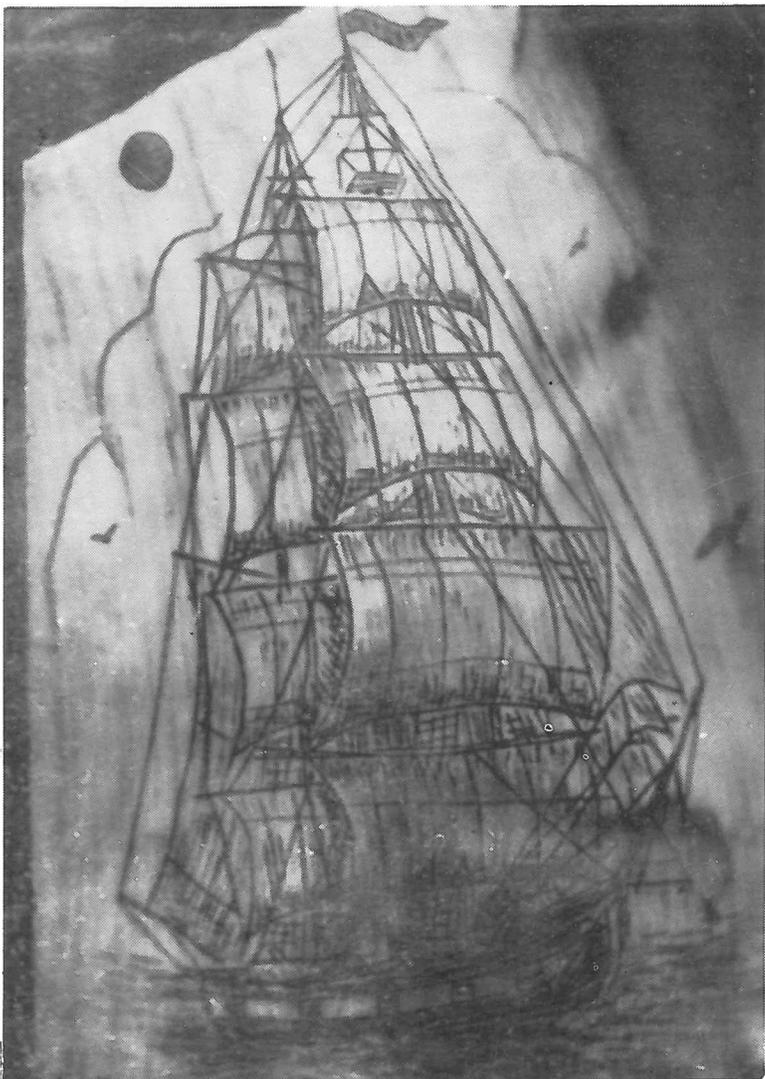
Bill could, in fact, be called a "jack-of-all-trades". He not only is an excellant scrimshander, but he also does silk screening, has a mountainous collection of oldies, but goodies, (records from the 1950's.) and thousands of old comic books. At night Bill is a bartender at a local bar. He is also a member of the Medicine Springs Skunk Skinners and Beaver Trapper's Association, an organization of muzzle loaders and outdoorsmen in Steamboat. Bill is an "easy-going" guy and is always trying something new. Says Bill about Scrimshaw "I'm still learning, all the time. I spend most of my days learning."



"Tools of the Trade."



Higbee associate, John Bower, carved this piece.



A "sailing vessel" done by Higbee.

