

What makes a woodchuck chuck?

Don't call woodcarvers and whittlers, 'chisellers'

By DON MILLER
Sentinel Staff Writer

KATE WILLIAMS whittles while she works. Better yet, her whittling is her work. And even more to the point, she wants you to know she's a whittler, not a carver.

What's the difference? A whittler like Soquel's Williams, uses only a knife in working a piece of wood. A carver uses a variety of chisels and other small wood-working tools to form his figures.

Note: Do not call either variety of woodworker a *chiseler*.

Williams is a member of the Santa Cruz chapter of the California Carver's Guild. The group will be showing its work at Branciforte Library, 230 Gault St. for the remainder of April.

Club president Bob Bourgeois of Capitola started carving wood 50 years ago. Then he took the next half century off. A few years ago, he picked up his chisel again. Now he's carved animals, a family crest, a fireplace bellows ...

"Most of the people in the club are retired," Bourgeois says. Classes are 1-4 p.m., Tuesdays, in the basement of the Santa Cruz Senior Center on Market Street. He says if enough interest is shown the club could expand to an evening class.

The 26 members hope to enter the Santa Clara Valley Woodcarvers and Crafters Show, April 27-28, in San Jose. Club vice president Harry Stoltz of Santa Cruz says beginners start with eight lessons, learning about tools and materials. Then they're on their own.

Stoltz is working on a penguin, carved into a block of Philippine mahogany. Nearby, Scotts Valley's Dave Olson puts finishing touches on a pair of blue wing teal ducks, so life-like that the observor

has to touch the wooden feathers to determine if they are the stuff of pillows or trees.

These ducks will never be carved for a Christmas dinner, nor are they meant to be decoys for waterfowl shooting — Olson is not a hunter. "I just appreciate wildlife," he says.

Allen Smith is the "master carver" — he instructs the others, all the while working on his 12-18 inch, highly detailed cowboy figures.

Smith says he finishes a cowboy a week, spending about 15 hours on each. Then, "I put them on the mantle piece," Smith says.

How did he get started? Smith laughs. "I started with furniture decorating and it gradually disintegrated into this. After you've done a few of these, it's not so painstaking."

Meanwhile, whittler Williams is gnawing a piece of basswood — "it's soft, and I'm not strong enough to work the other (hard) woods" — into a gnome figure.

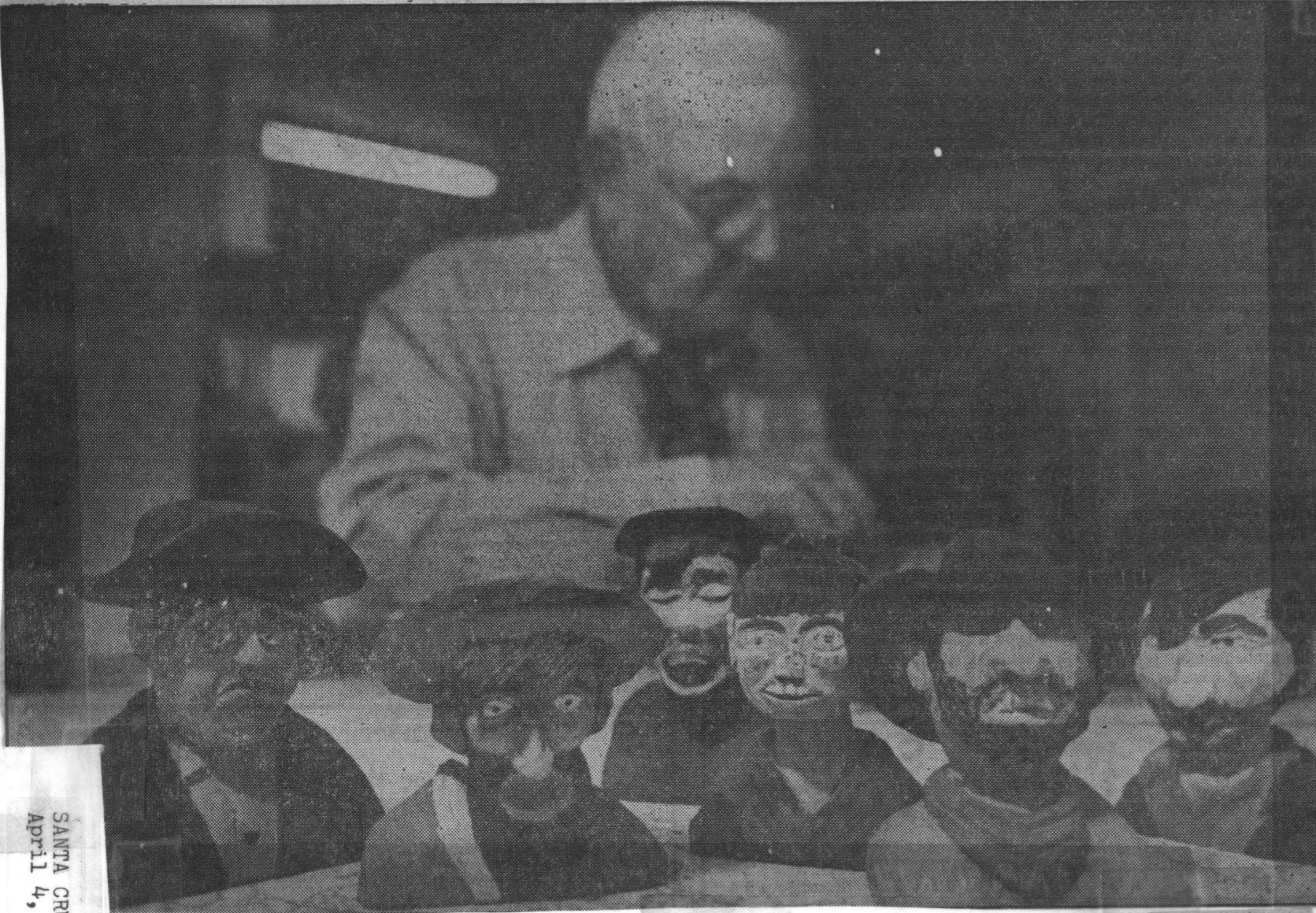
"You see a lot of cowboy figures," she says, her knife going *chip-chip-chip* as she talks. "A lot of people do 'em well. Plus, you gotta get an ugly face on cowboys, and I tend to make them cute. "Gnomes fit better with the way I carve."

Williams, who says she's self-taught, has been whittling for 2½ years, beginning with a bird figure.

"I saw it and said, 'It looks like a bird!' That hooked me," she recalls. Since then, it's been good wood, except for one poor stroke of the knife which required 11 stitches in her thumb.

It also might be a knife way to make a living. Williams says she's sold a few pieces and recently was commissioned to whittle a farmer, a clown and a lawyer.

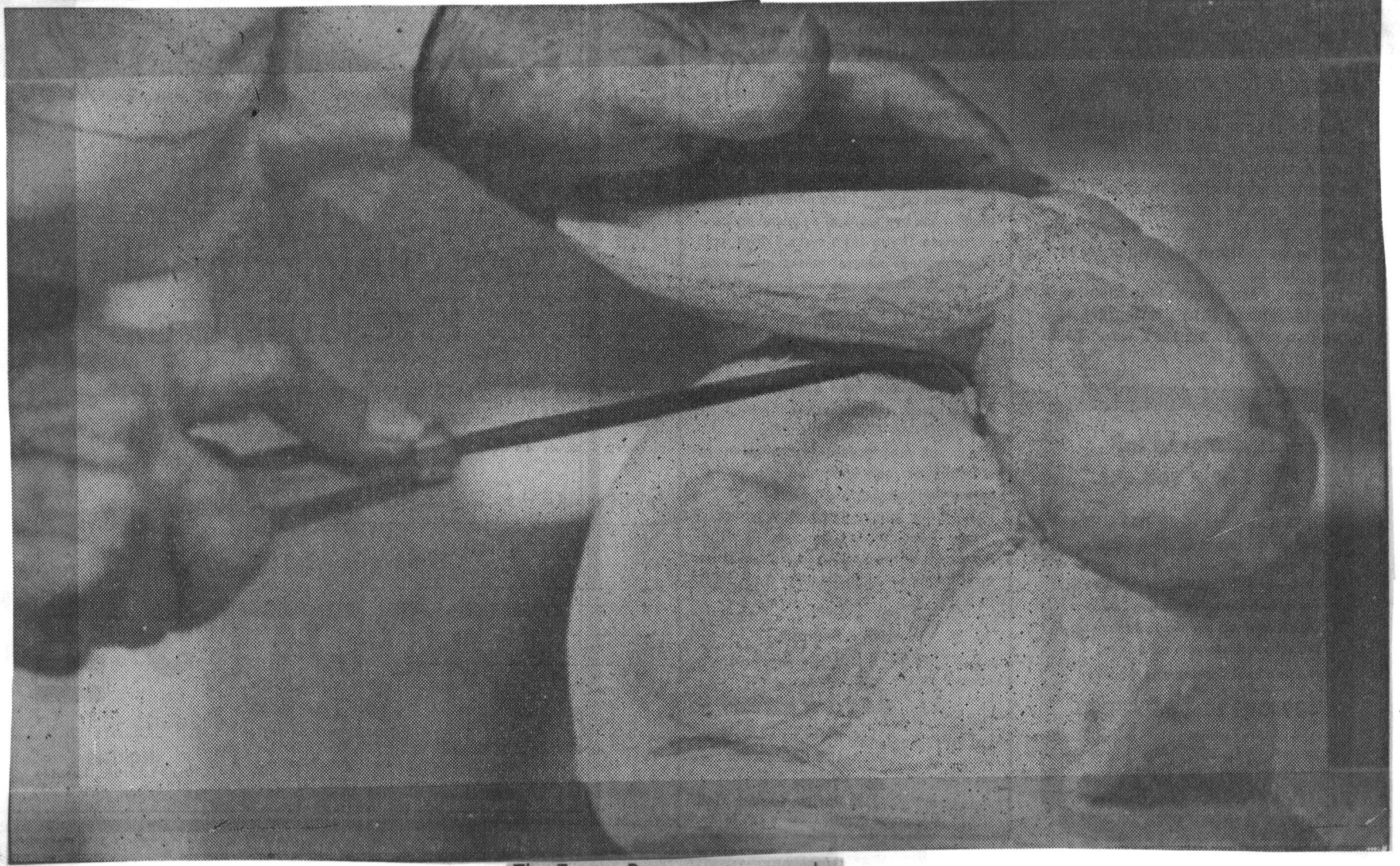
No chiselers, though.



Smith's carved cowpokes stare woodenly squinted eyes.

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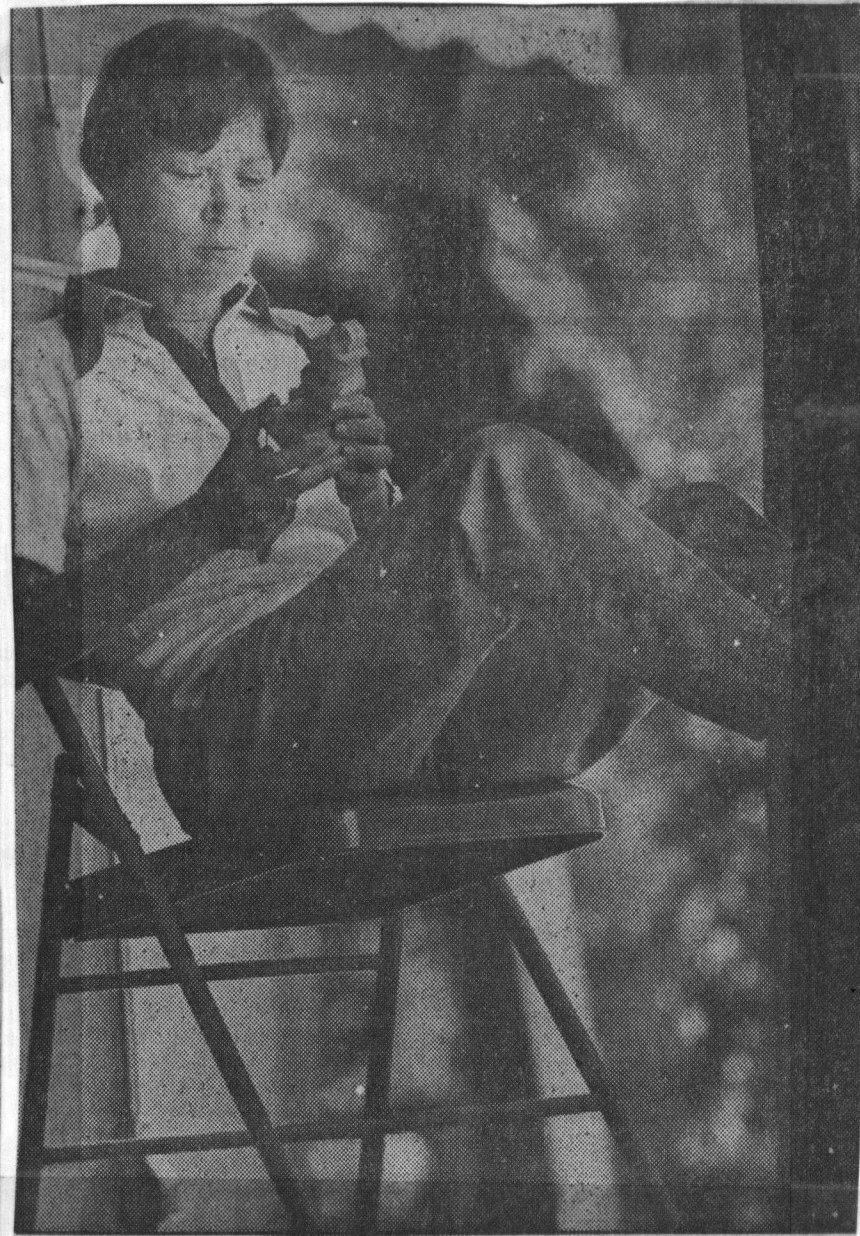
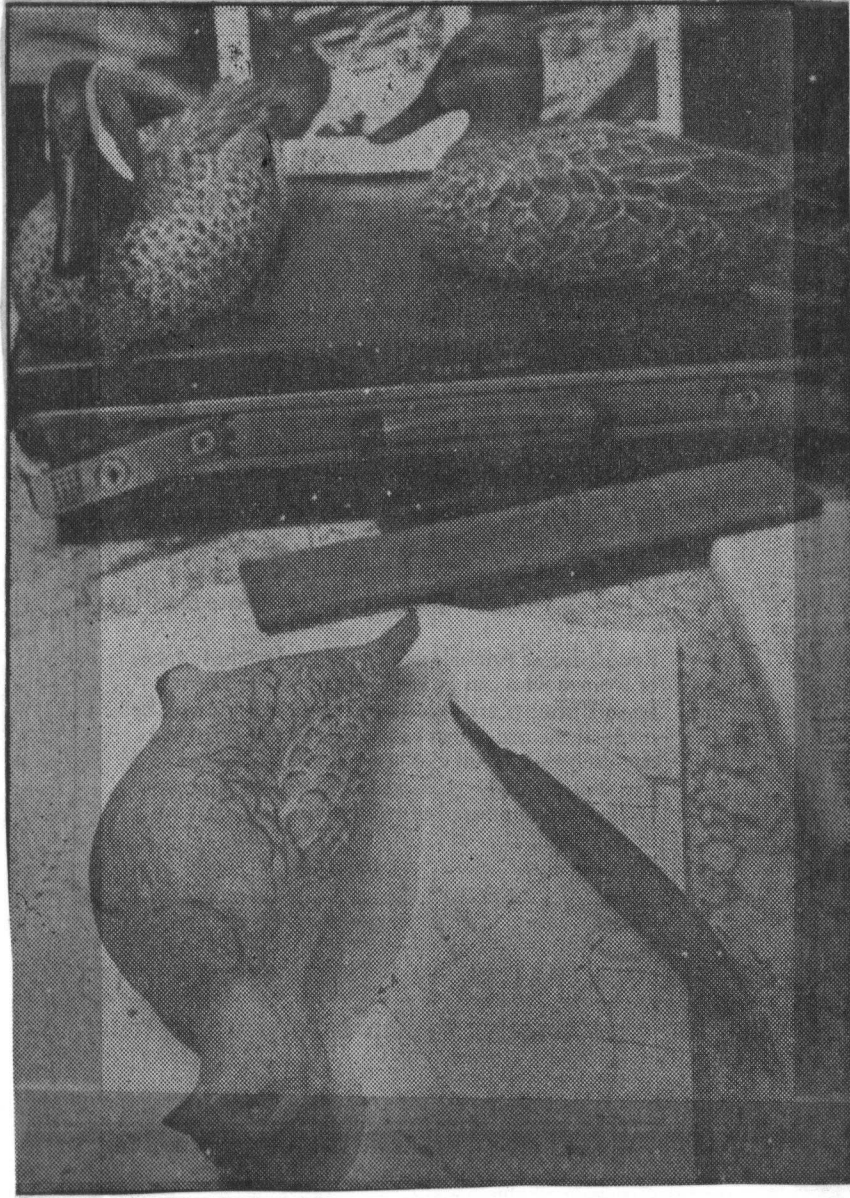


Photos by Bill Lovejoy



Master carver Allen Smith, above, works with tools of the trade. Above left, these cowboys are going to head them off at the pass.

Below: Blueprints lead to blue wing teal ducks.



Above: Kate Williams rocks and whittles.