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Lamps From The Sea

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ALLADIN'S LAMP had magical powers, but even more magical is the story of a root that turned into a lamp. Mr. Oscar Trueblood, Ames shoe merchant for 32 years, discovered a profitable hobby when he began turning odd-shaped pieces of driftwood into useful lamps. Since that time there has been a growing demand for these rustic creations.

It started when his wife suggested he try making a lamp out of a root he picked up in the country. He liked the finished product so well that he ordered wood from the coast and began production on a larger scale. Every single lamp is different. Some of the pieces have floated in from such far-off places as China, Japan, Phillipines and the Solomon Islands, and as they drift across the ocean they develop interesting twists and turns due to the constant washing of the water.

Interesting Shapes

Often you can see shapes of animals in the wood, but usually the curious design of the wood itself is enough to make the lamp an art piece. Many of the lamps have been weathered in such a way that there are little niches where potted ivys and other vines may grow.

Probably the most fascinating thing about the lamps is the mystery that surrounds the origin of the wood. How old it is, where it came from, whether it's a piece of root, limb or trunk of a tree, no one knows. One of the lamps even looks as though it could have been an old post on a wharf that had been badly eaten by bugs, to give it a honey-comb look.

Busy Bugs

The carpenter and teredos ant insects are mainly responsible for the holes in the wood, which only add to the beauty. Some of Mr. Trueblood's customers have been afraid to buy these lamps for fear the bugs may still be inside. However a trip across the ocean and a thorough spraying eliminates danger of this.

Perhaps you have picked up wood in the mountains of Colorado or submerged in the waters of the Minnesota lakes. While these pieces lack the character of the ocean drift wood, they have a uniqueness all their own. Lamps are the only things Mr. Trueblood makes, but it is by no means the end of the wood's possibilities. Table center pieces, hangings for over mantels, book ends and bases for ash trays are only a few of the things an imaginative person can create.

The wood when first picked up is weathered and drab looking. You wonder how it could be used for anything but fire wood. The decayed wood should be dug out, and a thorough sanding is the first step. Mr. Trueblood leaves on some of the greyish color caused by the ocean salt brine. Most people use varnish or wax to give a finished look to the wood, but Mr. Trueblood claims that this destroys the natural beauty, so uses a secret process that took him eight months to develop. This process gives a permanent finish while retaining the original coloring of the wood.

Many of the Ames merchants are using Truecraft lamps in displays. However, the larger percentage of lamps have been sold out of town. There is a growing demand for them by people who own summer cottages, as they seem to fit in well with a rustic surrounding. The lamps are quite versatile and will fit in just as well in modern surroundings, as interior decorators from Chicago and other large cities have been discovering.

Mr. Trueblood started making lamps three years ago. Since his shoe shop keeps him busy during the day, he spends his evenings working on the bases while his wife and another woman make the yarn shades. Four colors and two sizes of shades seem to take care of most of the demands. So far, Mr. Trueblood has made about 150 lamps and sold 50 at a price of $25 to $50 per lamp. The price is based on the uniqueness and price of the original piece of wood and the time spent on it. An average of ten hours is required to finish the lamp and wire it, and another ten to make the shade.

Driftwood lamps are on display at the Trueblood Shoe Shop in Dogtown. If you're interested in making lamps as a hobby or fascinated by the uniqueness of the lamps, you're welcome to go in and browse around.