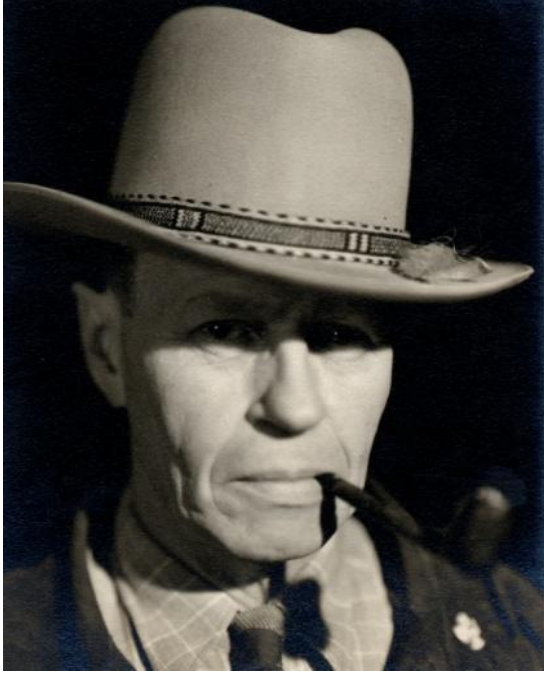


W. Ben Hunt

By Mark G. Thiel¹



W. BEN HUNT



Building his log cabin, 1924²

Walter Bernard “Ben” Hunt (March 13, 1888– March 30, 1970) was an American artist, outdoor educator and author of self-illustrated do-it-yourself books and articles on diverse leisure-time activities, which included Native American arts and performance, woodworking, whittling, scoutcraft, pioneering, jewelry making, metalworking and calligraphy.

Hunt was born and raised in the then rural town (now city) of Greenfield in Milwaukee County, Wisconsin, where several childhood experiences molded his do-it-yourself interests and advocacy. His father was an experienced log worker and he grew up in a log cabin.³ His grandmother told him stories about the local native people; she taught him drawing, whittling and leather work; and she encouraged self reliance by making, instead of buying, necessary

¹Since 1986 the author has served as an archivist at Marquette University with responsibilities for acquiring and interpreting Native American collections. He wishes to thank George Fix and Walter Wolak of the Heritage Scout Museum and Bob Zeit of the Hales Corners Historical Society for their generous research support in developing this article. All images except the portrait of Frank Smart courtesy the Walter Bernard Hunt Collection, Marquette University.

²W. Ben Hunt, *How to Build and Furnish a Log Cabin: The Easy-Natural Way using only Hand Tools and the Woods around You* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 38. This picture is included here within a four-stage sequence.

³Hunt, *How to Build and Furnish a Log Cabin*, 8 and 98; revised from *Building a Log Cabin*. Included here are pictures of Hunt’s childhood log cabin home and his father helping a worker handsaw a log by “sitting” it, i.e. sitting on the opposite end.

things. He read *Boy's Life*, a monthly Boy Scout magazine, with its many articles by Daniel Carter Beard on pioneering, camp crafts and native art, and he had a friendly personal encounter with traveling Indian performers in Buffalo Bill's Wild-West show when it performed in Milwaukee.⁴ Later, he attended South Division High School in Milwaukee, but dropped out to become employed as a lithographic engraver (now graphics designer) at the Bruce Publishing Company, which later published several of his books.⁵

In 1920, with his wife Laura, Hunt settled in nearby Hales Corners, and four years later behind their residence on Janesville Road, he built a log cabin with his father-in-law and brother Edwin. They built the original 16x28-foot structure with local tamarack logs and it became the subject of Hunt's first article, "How We built Our Log Cabin."⁶ With his brother he then coauthored a number of books displaying calligraphy.⁷ But in his subsequent do-it-yourself writings, Hunt continued to provide glimpses of the cabin, which served as the studio where he created and displayed his prototypes, illustrations and rustic furnishings as well as gifts from fellow crafts people.⁸

In his research, Hunt visited the Milwaukee Public Library and Milwaukee Public Museum⁹ and by 1937, the year before he published his first native-related book, Hunt began to travel and visit with Native American artists and cultural experts. Among the first was Nick Black Elk, an Oglala Indian leader who became famous with his book, *Black Elk Speaks*. Hunt met with him and others at the Duhamel Sioux Indian Pageant, which Black Elk narrated in the South Dakota Black Hills. Also that year Hunt visited Parson's Indian Trading Post near Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin, and met Evergreen Tree, a star of the Stand Rock Indian Ceremonial from Cochiti Pueblo in New Mexico; and he visited Lac du Flambeau, Wisconsin, where he met Frank Smart (or Chief Gogeoweosh), an Ojibwa leader from the Bad River Indian Reservation and one-time Milwaukee resident, who narrated the Lac du Flambeau Indian pageant.¹⁰ Later he traveled to the Southwest where he met several Native American artists and James F. "Buck" Burshears of the Boy Scout Koshare Indian dancers in La Junta, Colorado.¹¹ Thereafter, Hunt

⁴ W. Ben Hunt, *Indian Crafts and Lore*, "About Ben Hunt", 4-5 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954).

⁵ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, "Hours of Pleasure to Many is His Intent," September 11, 1967, 3:3.

⁶ W. Ben Hunt, "How We built Our Log Cabin", *The American Home*, 2 (1929):187.

⁷ W. Ben and Ed C. Hunt, *Lettering Today*, front cover (1939: Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co.).

⁸ Hunt, *Indian Crafts and Lore*, 5.

⁹ W. Ben Hunt and Fred Schmidt, *Indian and Camp Handicraft*, Preface (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1938); W. Ben Hunt, *Indiancraft*, Preface (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1942); Hales Corners Historical Society, *Ben Hunt Cabin: 5885 South 116th Street, Hales Corners, Wisconsin* (Hales Corners, Wis.: Hales Corners Historical Society, [200-]).

¹⁰ Hunt and Schmidt, *Indian and Camp Handicraft*, 33; W. Ben Hunt, *The Complete How-to Book of Indiancraft* (Collier Books, 1973), 75; John and Jean Krainik, interview by author, September 30, 1989; Bernard Hunt [Photograph] Collection, Biographical note, Marquette University, <http://www.marquette.edu/library/collections/archives/Mss/WBH/WBHsc.html>, retrieved April 18, 2010. *The Complete How-to Book of Indiancraft* is a revised edition of *Indian and Camp Handicrafts*, which includes Hunt's 1937 portrait of Black Elk in regalia. Collectively, this evidence strongly suggests that Hunt visited the Black Hills, Wisconsin Dells, and northern Wisconsin during the summer of 1937.

¹¹ Koshare Indian Museum, Koshare Timeline, <http://kosharehistory.org/news/timeline.html>, retrieved May 1, 2010. Hunt and Burshears collaborated on *American Indian Beadwork* during the spring of 1950.

maintained a round of visitations to Indian trading posts and museums, Indian reservations, Indian pageants, and many artisans who became his friends.¹²

Meanwhile during the Great Depression, Hunt began to teach “Indian lore”¹³ to Milwaukee’s predominantly blue-collar scout leaders. They wanted a handcrafts program for their troops. So Hunt, with his extensive do-it-yourself knowledge and “homespun” humor, presented an array of projects with widespread possibilities. The leaders were very receptive and their subsequent input and that of scouts themselves, then aided Hunt in the ongoing development of more projects.¹⁴ In 1942, Hunt succeeded Beard and began to write articles for Boy’s Life on pioneering, camp crafts and Indian art. He became a regular member of the Boy’s Life staff and through 1964, he wrote over 1,000 articles, an average of three to four per issue, under three pennames besides his own. He signed articles on native art and performance with “Lone Eagle,” (or “Wanblee Ishnala,” its Lakota Sioux equivalent); those on whittled neckerchief slides with “Whittling Jim”; and those on pioneering and camping-related crafts and skills with “Ben Hunt”. On four occasions – 1950, 1953, 1957, and 1960 – he also served on the staff of the National Boy Scout Jamboree and displayed his whittled and native-inspired art, which were the subjects of his *Boy’s Life* articles.¹⁵

Hunt welcomed visitors, and by 1945, his writings on native art, in conjunction with his Scouting involvement, attracted regular gatherings at his cabin and stimulated local interest in native heritage beyond Scouting. Two years earlier, Milwaukee County Council scout leaders had established Mikano Lodge as their Order of the Arrow chapter of the Boy Scouts’ national honor camping society of which Hunt soon became a member. Its activities used Native American-inspired regalia at Indian Mound Reservation, the council’s camp in Waukesha County, and its key OA members then gathered at Hunt’s cabin when making this regalia.¹⁶ As interest in native arts continued to grow, scouts and leaders graduated first to dancing and then to organizing Indian dance clubs such as Mila Scopa, which was not affiliated with Scouting. From 1948 to 1964, Hunt and like-minded enthusiasts from Milwaukee and across the Midwest gathered for the Wa-ba-ski-wa Indian Fair, an annual weekend of native-related

¹² Hunt, *Indian Crafts and Lore*, 5. The speed by which Hunt acquired many native and non-native friends speaks to his character and personality, which resonated with people of diverse backgrounds. Hunt was a sincere and caring man who was humble and unpretentious. A Ho Chunk friend of the author from central Wisconsin reported that his parents knew Hunt and had autographed copies of some of his books. The friend had been a scout and both of his parents were scout and tribal leaders. Like Hunt, they helped others and promoted native performing arts, and presumably, they had helped Hunt as well and these were complementary copies.

¹³ Museums and scholars did not recognize objects made by native artisans as art until the 1960s. When Hunt began writing, they were known as “artifacts” and terms such as “crafts” and “lore” were the best available. By including native-inspired home décor among his projects, Hunt helped to elevate the status of native-made objects in ways understood by his readers. See David W. Penney, *Art of the American Indian Frontier: The Chandler-Pohrt Collection*, 344-350 “Artifacts into Art” (Detroit: The Detroit Institute of Arts, 1992).

¹⁴ Hunt, *Indian and Camp Handicrafts*, Preface, acknowledges assistance from Troop 598, Hales Corners; W. Ben Hunt and J. F. Burshears, *American Indian Beadwork*, Preface (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1951) acknowledges assistance of Burshear’s Troop 230, the Koshare dancers, La Junta Colorado.

¹⁵ *The Milwaukee Journal*, “Ben Hunt Dies; Artist for Boy Scout Magazine,” March 31, 1970; W. Ben Hunt, *Boy’s Life*, 32-54 (1942-1964); Hales Corners Historical Society, *Ben Hunt Cabin*; Hunt, *Indian Crafts and Lore*, 5.

¹⁶ Krainik, interview; George Fix, Mikano Lodge historian, interview by author, April 16, 2010. The chief of Mikano Lodge in 1945 was among the youth members who gathered at Hunt’s cabin to make regalia. Eventually he married Hunt’s daughter, which suggests that he spent a considerable amount of time at Hunt’s home.

powwow dancing and camping near Janesville, Wisconsin.¹⁷ Its participants gathered not only to celebrate native culture, but to share it with eager neophytes who came to learn. During the late 1940s, one such visitor recalled, "I was a Scoutmaster [and a college student] with older scouts ... who wanted to learn about 'Indian lore'. So, with my two Assistant Scoutmasters [who were also college students], we hitch-hiked from West Lafayette, Indiana, to the Wa-ba-ski-wa Indian Fair... [to] ... meet Ben Hunt and John Lotter. They took us in... taught us to dance and turned us to the right people and right sources. [I] remember that we danced all night to get it right..."¹⁸

By the 1950s, the Indian dancing skills of OA-member scouts gained sophistication under Hunt's influence. Among them was an enterprising protégé and one-time OA lodge chief who led local entertainment by wearing native garb as "Chief White Buck." First, he hosted a local television show for children on the WTMJ channel. Then, as a Marquette University student after the 1953 summer debut of the Milwaukee Braves baseball team, he led Marquette's football homecoming festivities, which culminated with the adoption of "Warriors" as its sports team nickname.¹⁹

Many of Hunt's writings were reprinted several times and distributed worldwide.²⁰ His books comprised 30 to 70 articles each and a number were reworked and expanded with revised titles and many were translated into German, French, Italian, Spanish, and 22 other languages.²¹ Hunt's also commissioned a Wisconsin manufacturer to distribute a series of 12 do-it-yourself kits developed from his writings on Indian regalia and whittling.²²

In 1948, the National Council, Boy Scouts of America, and Milwaukee County Council, recognized Hunt for his outstanding service to youth, and in turn, this prompted local friends to present him with the Silver Bison Award, a satirical recognition modeled after the Buffalo-head

¹⁷ Mark Thiel, "In Pursuit of Dancing the Indian Way," part 2, *Whispering Wind*, 6:6(1973): 10-12. The name "Wa-ba-ski-wa" translated as "white" in Ojibwa, and except for a few native supporters such as Smart, its participants were not Native Americans.

¹⁸ Teed Howard email to author, May 5, 2010. At this time, Howard and his assistant scoutmasters were students at Purdue University; John Lotter was a friend of Ben Hunt's from the Chicago area.

¹⁹ Hunt Collection, Biographical Note, accessed April 18, 2010; C. Richard King, "Uneasy Indians: Creating and Contesting Native American Mascots at Marquette University," 284-288, in C. Richard King and Charles Fruehling Springwood, ed., *Team Spirits: The Native American Mascots Controversy* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 2001).

²⁰ William K. Powers, "The Indian Hobbyist Movement in North America," 557-561, and Colin F. Taylor, "The Indian Hobbyist Movement in Europe," 562-572, in William C. Sturtevant, general ed., *Handbook of North American Indians, v. 4 Indian-White Relations* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1988). The articles detail developments among hobbyists and enthusiasts of Native American heritage, who became a significant segment of the readers of Hunt's books. Hunt cited on 557.

²¹ Hales Corners Historical Society, *Ben Hunt Cabin*; Worldcat, <http://www.worldcat.org/>, cites editions in German, French, Italian, Spanish, and other languages, retrieved April 16, 2010.

²² The Heritage Scout Museum displays the series of 12 Indian regalia and whittling kits commissioned by Hunt and manufactured and distributed by the Crafters of Pine Dunes in Waldo, Wisconsin. Hunt also sold the kits at his cabin.

nickel.²³ Years later in 1964, Mikano Lodge recognized Hunt as the first recipient of its Honored Scouter's Award.²⁴

Today, Hunt's writings are classics in do-it-yourself literature and his spirit lives on in the readers he inspired.

"Hunt influenced thousands, no tens of thousands of people. When you have a person with that much influence on so many people, he's important."

Alan Pape, Expert on log buildings²⁵

"...I corresponded with him as a young craft worker looking for some answers ... not to be found in the limited number of books ... available ... at that time, so I just fired off a letter to Mr. Ben Hunt in Hales Corners, Wisconsin and lo and behold, I got a very nice response... We wrote a few more times and I suppose that's one of the reasons I've been inspired to do the publishing that we've done."

J. Rex Reddick, Crazy Crow Trading Post²⁶

Articles

The American Home, "How We built Our Log Cabin," 2(1929): 187
Boy's Life, 32-54(1942-1964)

Books²⁷

Fifty Alphabets, and Edwin C. Hunt, 1931
Single Stroke Alphabets, Slant and Vertical, Plain & Ornamental, and Edwin C. Hunt, 1931
Lettering Today, and Edwin C. Hunt, 1935
Indian and Camp Handicraft, and Fred Schmidt, 1938
The Flat Bow, and John J. Metz, 1939
Rustic Construction, 1939; still in print
Indiancraft, 1942
Ben Hunt's Big Book of Whittling, 1944
Sixty Alphabets, 1944
Ben Hunt's Whittling Book, 1945

²³ The Hales Corners Historical Society displays Hunt's Silver Antelope, Silver Beaver and Silver Bison awards at the Ben Hunt cabin.

²⁴ History of Mikano Lodge, Order of the Arrow, <http://www.mikanolodge.org/display/router.asp?docid=67>, retrieved April 18, 2010.

²⁵ Alan Pape is an historian and preservation expert on log buildings, a founder of the Old World Wisconsin Historic Site, Eagle, Wisconsin, and an advisory board member of Centerville (Wisconsin) Settlement, Inc., <http://centervillesettlement.com/backgrnd.htm>; retrieved April 23, 2010.

²⁶ J. Rex Reddick email to author, April 24, 2010; Reddick owns and operates Crazy Crow Trading Post, <http://www.crazycrow.com/>, which he founded in 1970. It publishes books and sells products for Native American, rendezvous and historic reenacting activities and reprinted Hunt's *Indian Crafts and Lore* in 2005.

²⁷ Worldcat, <http://www.worldcat.org/>, retrieved April 16, 2010.

Building a Log Cabin, 1947
More Ben Hunt Whittlings, 1947
American Indian Beadwork, and J. F. Burshears, 1951
Indian Silversmithing, 1952
Crafts and Hobbies, 1954
Indian Crafts and Lore, 1954; still in print
Kachina Dolls, preface by Robert E. Ritzenthaler, 1957
101 Alphabets, and Edwin C. Hunt, 1958
Whittling with Ben Hunt, 1959
Contemporary Carving and Whittling, 1967
American Indian Survival Skills, 1973; compiled from previous books²⁸; still in print
Indian Lore, 1970s; Boy Scouts of America Merit Badge Series

Awards

Silver Antelope Award, Boy Scouts of America, April 27, 1948; national-level service to youth
Silver Beaver Award, Milwaukee County Council, November 23, 1948; local service to youth
Silver Bison Award to "Chief Knoster", Whittle and Spit Organization, November 30, 1948
Honored Scouter Award, Mikano Lodge, Order of the Arrow, 1964

Museums and Collections

Walter Bernard "Ben" Hunt [Photograph] Collection, 1920-1940s, Marquette University, Milwaukee
W. Ben Hunt Cabin, Hales Corners (Wisconsin) Public Library; landmark status: Milwaukee County Historic Landmark, January 24, 2005; Wisconsin Register of Historic Places, February 13, 2008; National Register of Historic Places, February 13, 2008
W. Ben Hunt exhibit, Scout Heritage Museum, Milwaukee County Council, Milwaukee

²⁸ "Editor's Introduction," *American Indian Survival Skills* (New York: Meredith Press, 1991).



Hunt created the cabin's furnishings

Ben Hunt's Whittling Book, 51



W. Ben Hunt by Fred Schmidt, before 1942²⁹

Chief Frank Smart³⁰



²⁹ Hunt, *Indiandcraft*, front pages, features this picture of Hunt at age 50 years or older.

³⁰ Frank Smart wearing Plains Indian-style chief's regalia and Ojibwa beadwork. Courtesy Heritage Scout Museum, Milwaukee.

