

The President's Gavel

Cheryle Jones Syracuse, (NC) NEAFCS Past-President, (2000) and Historian

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When Judith Breland calls the 75th Annual Meeting of NEAFCS to order in Birmingham, she will do so with a very special NEAFCS icon — the hand carved walnut gavel and sound block. This year's session will mark the 40th year of using this gavel to open and close our Annual Session.

This isn't your traditional hammer-type gavel and round sound block, but one commissioned by the Pennsylvania Affiliate in 1969 and presented to the Association when they met that year in Philadelphia. Mrs. Betty Struten, President of the Pennsylvania Affiliate presented Joyce Clark, the National President with the walnut gavel.



NEAFCS Gavel, Top View



NEAFCS Gavel and Sound Block



NEAFCS Gavel and Sound Block



NEAFCS Gavel, Sound Block



NEAFCS Gavel, Engraved Sound Block foot, E. Milan signature



NEAFCS Gavel, Engraved Sound Block foot, Walnut material ID



NEAFCS Gavel, Engraved Sound Block foot, Pennsylvania 1969

The Pennsylvania Affiliate commissioned Emil Milan, a Pennsylvania craftsman from Susquehanna County to carve the gavel and sound block for NAEHE/NEAFCS. The Pennsylvania Affiliate also has a gavel carved by the Milan. They are not exactly alike because he followed the lines of the wood when carving. The size and shape of the wood inspired each individual piece. He is quoted as saying: "My work is based on the beauty of natural form combined with function."

Milan was well known for carving birds and his trademark was the ruffed grouse (PA state bird). His woodcarving is very simple, with lots of smooth lines and nothing painted. According to the Luce Foundation for American Art, "Milan did not use a lathe to turn his objects, because he felt that this imposed limitations on shape. Instead, he used a band saw to cut his curved forms and then roughly hollowed them out with a drill. The surfaces were smoothed and refined with a gouge and finally sanded to a perfect finish. These techniques ensured each individual piece remained handcrafted and unique." Milan was born in 1922 and died in 1985.



Immediate Past-President Kathy Dothage opens the 2008 Annual Session

Jane Marhefka, retired Extension Agent from Mifflinton, PA remembers Milan teaching extension workshops in Pennsylvania in the late 1960's. He did wood carving workshops for both men and women during this time of resurgence of handcrafts and small cottage industries. Class participants successfully started businesses after attending one of Milan's workshops.

Marhefka also shared that Milan primarily made utilitarian items for the home such as stirring spoons, cutting boards, and wooden bowls. He considered his objects to be "functional sculpture" and never made anything that could not be used. She, personally, made a wooden tray in one of his workshops.

Examples of Emil Milan's works reside in the Smithsonian American Art Museum. His sculpture is occasionally sold at auction or on Ebay. We are indeed very fortunate to own a one-of-a-kind piece of art!



The gavel at rest during NEAFCS Business Meeting

Historian note: Our history shows that other Association Presidents also used a unique gavel. In 1953, in the installation ceremony, Eugene Landingham (NC) accepted the office of President as Past President Carmina Johnson presented her with the NHDAA gavel that had been made from a walnut tree from the farm that had been in her family for 90 years. Johnson used the gavel during her term as President (1952). The current location of this walnut gavel is unknown. (CJS 2009)