

Grand Lodge of Ohio on October 22, 1852, Dodds was already a "Grand Officer" in the Masons and signed the Van Wert charter as "William B. Dodds, S.G.W." Little else is known about Dodds, in particular his occupation and if it would lend itself to carving fine powder horns for fellow Masons.

Two old stories relating to the horn carver's possible identity have circulated in the mid-west for years. Both stories contain shreds of truth, but neither truly document the carver's identity. The first story involves the VanTrees family of Mercer County, Ohio. Gunsmith and horn owner James F. VanTrees used a hardened steel name stamp to mark barrels of guns he made. A family story contends that an old itinerant engraver needing his horse shod visited the VanTrees' gunsmith & blacksmith shop prior to the Civil War. VanTrees and the engraver worked out a mutually satisfactory arrangement, whereby VanTrees agreed to shoe his horse in return for the engraver making a steel name stamp for his rifle barrels. So while VanTrees was making horseshoes, his counterpart was working a flattened piece of bar stock into a name stamp with "J. F. VanTrees" on its face. The story does not claim the old engraver had a connection to the Mercer County horns, but it does place an itinerant or travelling engraver capable of decorating powder horns in the area at the right time. He shows up at the VanTrees shop prior to the Civil War during the time some of the horns were made. As a gunsmith VanTrees undoubtedly made plain powder horns to accompany new guns for at least some of his customers; it would be easy to see an old engraver decorating a few horns while in the area, and may explain the fact that several fine horns were in the VanTrees family.

The second story regarding the carver also involves a traveling engraver. Horn #MC-3 carries the name of William Halstead of Shelby County, Indiana and is dated 1849. The horn is a fine example of the Mercer County carver's work, with many typical details of the carving school. An old story has circulated in Indiana that Halstead was an engraver working for a bank in Shelbyville, Indiana. He was charged with counterfeiting bank notes, which ruined his



Illustration No. 9: The "Jacob Iler" horn #MC-4 is the smallest known Mercer County horn, and probably a shot or ball horn based on the larger diameter of its spout opening. While lacking room for carving, it still carries the owner's name, his bust, and leafy vines in the shape of arches on either side. The arch is thought to represent a Masonic Temple when present on Mercer County horns, despite the lack of other more obvious symbols.

banking career and forced him to leave Shelby County. Some powder horn collectors feel the lettering on the William Halstead horn indicates the work of a professional engraver, i.e., William Halstead himself, and he made the horn before the scandal broke that forced him to leave Shelby County. If the story is true, it might explain an itinerant engraver moving around between Ohio and Indiana, and carving horns from time to time to make a few dollars. If he were a Mason, it would also explain the Masonic imagery on the horns, and the support he received from his Masonic brothers such as the VanTrees, in getting work or assistance as he traveled through the Ohio/Indiana border area. However, this story does not explain the "W. D." initials on at least

two horns that seemingly hint at the engraver's identity. Unless, of course, a far-fetched suggestion could be true, that Halstead wanted to avoid detection, so used the first initial of his first name, but the LAST initial of his last name. However, there is no evidence to suggest any credibility to this possibility.

Part of the difficulty in identifying the elusive carver is the area over which original horn owners are found, ranging across multiple counties in Ohio and Indiana. Most horns were carved in or near Mercer County, Ohio, but it is also possible the carver was from a near-by county, possibly even Indiana, carving and delivering horns across county lines. The carver may have also moved around, visiting various counties with Masonic lodges and carving Masonic-related horns as he went. The horns' folk art beauty and Masonic imagery undoubtedly caught the eye of other local Masons, stirring their desires to have such a horn. While not proven, the VanTrees gun shop may have played a role in getting the possible horn maker [VanTrees] and horn carver ["W. D."] together to produce these fine horns. It is hoped that a fully signed horn will surface, perhaps one made and carried by the carver himself, illuminating his full name for researchers. But until Masonic records assist in unraveling the mystery or a fully signed horn appears, the search continues.

Tansel Influences: The 1848 Hezekiah VanTrees horn #MC-2 has unmistakable Tansel-style influences, particularly in the "fish mouth" treatment of the horn's spout end, and its many Tansel-type figures including an American eagle with shielded chest, military heroes, Indian figure with "Black Hawk" banner, polychromed figures, hunting dog and deer, and neatly shaded block lettering cut between parallel lines. The many similar figures, coupled with the general coverage of the horn, are too similar in feel to accept as chance. Tansel horns were used and recognized throughout central Indiana, Ohio and Kentucky, particularly after 1829 when the Tansels' moved from Kentucky to Indiana. The Mercer County horn carver undoubtedly saw and appreciated the decoration on Tansel horns. In particular, the "fish-mouth" throat on Hezekiah VanTrees' horn



Illustration Nos. 10a, b: The "Phillip Alspaugh" horn is important to the Mercer County attribution of these fine horns. Horn #MC-7 documents not only its owner's name and date of "1854" in a large cartouche, but also specifies its place of origin as "Mercer County, Ohio," and its carver as "W*D" in script letters. The horn has polychroming, "checkerboarding," leafy vines, a "rooster headed" eagle, and bulbous walnut plug with decorative incised rings and iron staple, all typical Mercer County characteristics.





Illustration Nos. 11a, b, c: The "James F. VanTrees" horn MC-8, dated "1855," has been previously illustrated. These additional views show: a) a typical deer with turned head and hunting dog with collar; b) Masonic imagery including a moon, stars, compass, and a cross made of stars; c) Masonic emblem of a square and compass in a round cartouche, with the name "James Mott" above, thought to be the individual who gave the horn to owner James F. VanTrees. The letter "J*A*B" may have a Masonic meaning, perhaps indicating the rank or position of James Mott in the organization. Note the "checkerboard" shading of the arch, and small half-moon cutout at basal edge of the horn where a now missing iron strap attachment was screwed into the butt plug's side, rather than end.

verifies the Tansel influence. Several other Mercer County horns, plus the earlier "prototype" horns from 1834 and 1835, have large scrimshawed lobes, or loops, on the horn body, not relief carved into lobes as on Tansel horns, but none-the-less decorated in a manner suggestive of a looping "fish-mouth" type design. The field of stars over the eagle and "E Pluribus Unum" slogans also appear to be taken from earlier Tansel horns. It should be noted that a number of Tansel horns had Masonic symbols within their carved decoration, but not as frequent, pronounced or of such major importance as on Mercer County horns. Tansel horns were a significant folk art

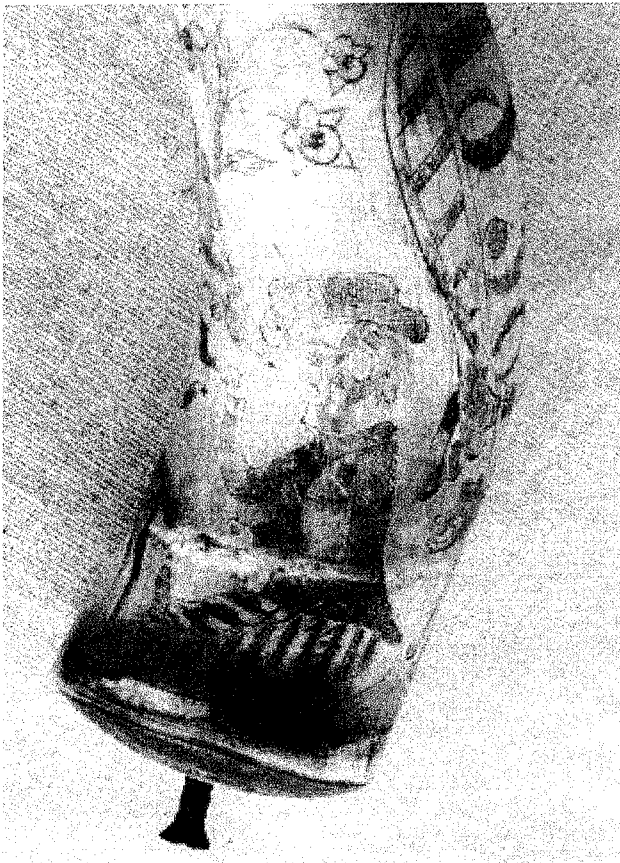


Illustration No. 12: The latest known Mercer County horn #MC-9 is dated "1856" but carries no owner's name. It does have a rooster eagle, seated hunter smoking a pipe, and dog and deer. This horn lacks obvious Masonic symbols, probably due to no Mason's name being present. The horn is rather small with the later style low domed walnut plug also seen on horn MC-8, and represents the declining days of the Mercer County horn.

form in the mid-west, recognized by the common man because he understood how they reflected his own interests and daily life. The Mercer County carver felt a similar connection to the common man, as well as to a higher Masonic calling, and continued the Tansel tradition of finely carved horns for another decade in the Ohio-Indiana border area. The changing times and reduced reliance on hunting caused Mercer County horns to see less use than their earlier counterparts, yet despite being more a memento than a working horn, they were undoubtedly admired in their day for their beauty, craftsmanship and Masonic message. Their folk art decoration still captured the heart and soul of common men for a few more years, as the frontier quietly melted away.

Summary: Mercer County horns are a significant, identifiable group of American powder horns that truly merit being called a "school" of

carved horns. They were made for a decade or more in the 1847-1857 timeframe, probably by one carver known only as "W. D.," but perhaps supported by one or more less prolific carvers over the years. The horns took their character and folk art roots from the earlier Tansel horns of nearby Indiana, at the time Tansel production was fading. Mercer County horns are well carved, highly decorated, and have distinctive Masonic images, circular cartouches with owners' names and dates, and droopy winged, rooster headed eagles as trademarks. Their artwork depicted everyday life in the mid-west, along with strong Masonic imagery, and proudly displayed their owners' names, acquisition dates and often bust-form image. To most horn owners the display of their Masonic affiliation was undoubtedly an important aspect of the horns. It was probably this Masonic relationship, not yet fully understood, that limited the production of Mercer County horns. Tansel horns were carved for the general public and therefore undoubtedly made in larger quantities than Mercer County horns. The Mercer County horn may have been made to celebrate a significant Masonic event in the life of its owner, and perhaps therefore was limited to Masonic ownership, restricting the times "W. D." put his carving knife to the surface of a horn. Regardless of the driving force behind their creation, sufficient Mercer County horns exist today, all closely related in style and made over a period of years in a defined regional area, to create a significant new school of American carved powder horns worthy of being called Mercer County horns.

Note of Thanks: The writer wishes to thank KRA members Jim Johnston, Jim Dresslar and Jon Anspaugh for sharing their powder horns and knowledge about Mercer County horns. The writer continues to research Mercer County-type powder horns and original owners, and encourages readers with knowledge of these horns or related information to contact him evenings at 219-625-9950.