

Located in the heart of the picturesque Litchfield Hills of northwestern Connecticut is a bed and breakfast called 7C Herb Garden B&B. There are many bed and breakfast establishments in this area; it is a famous destination for experiencing classic New England countryside. But what makes this place noteworthy—especially to anyone interested in woodworking—

is its proprietor, Hansel Collins, and his wife, Alicia. At age 90 and blind, Jamaican-born Collins remains an avid woodworker and offers for sale skillfully made wooden kitchen items, hand-carved or turned on the lathe.

When I arrived at the B&B to interview Hansel, I thanked him for taking the time for me. “All I got is time,” Hansel laughingly said in his easy accent. “Not much

money, but lots of time.” It is evident that he is content with his life. He is not in a hurry, and even at 90 he appears strong and able. I am inspired.

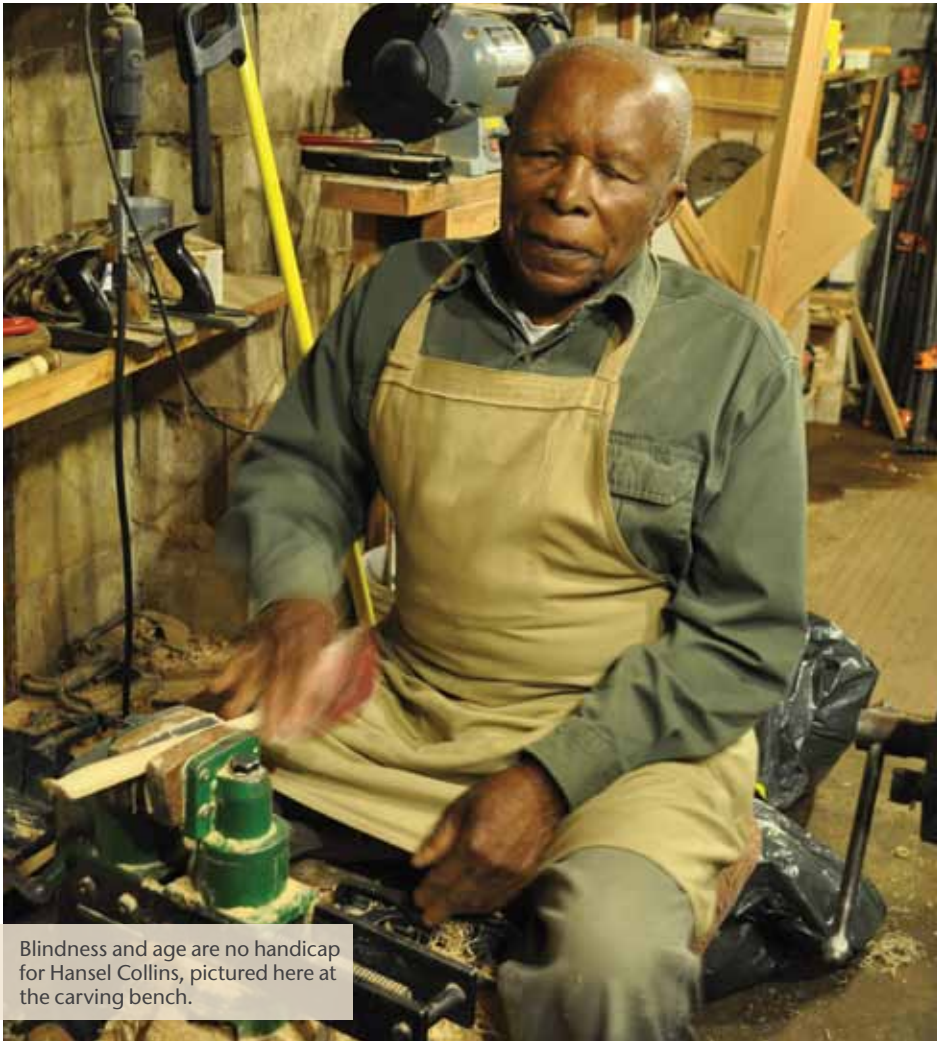
We sat at his dining room table, which is in the oldest portion of the house—dating to the 1730s, with the original floorboards! Strewn across the table is a bounty of Hansel’s woodcrafts: tasting and mixing spoons, spatulas, forks, salad servers, cutting and cheese boards, and letter openers, which were all hand-carved and sanded at the carving bench. There is also a turned wooden bowl, 18” in diameter. Its creation would be impressive for any woodturner, let alone someone without sight.

Hansel gradually went blind from glaucoma. In 1968, when he and Alicia bought the four-acre property, his sight had deteriorated to limited tunnel vision. To make matters more challenging, the old house had sat vacant for four years before the Collinses found it, so it needed a lot of work, which Hansel did mostly by himself.

A growing family

Hansel and Alicia moved to rural New Preston, CT, from Bridgeport, CT, because they needed more space for their growing family. Over the years, they had six children of their own, fostered twelve, and adopted three of the foster children. Hansel first told me about their kids over the phone, and when I asked again to confirm how many they had fostered, he replied with his characteristic humor, “Twelve so far.” I told Hansel it is clear that he is not afraid of hard work, and he replied simply, “I grew up on hard work.” There is no arrogance or resentment in the statement, merely factual acknowledgement.

If you visit the 7C Herb Garden B&B, you might hear firsthand the story of how Hansel and Alicia met and eventually married. Hansel came to the United States during World War II as part of a program that provided additional farm labor while civilians were called away



Blindness and age are no handicap for Hansel Collins, pictured here at the carving bench.

THE REMARKABLE HANSEL COLLINS

Joshua Friend

from their jobs. As it happened, a woman who lived near Hansel had the flu, so he offered his “home remedy”—quinine. The quinine nearly killed her, but even so, she and Hansel became friends.

That woman was Alicia’s aunt, and through her, he learned of Alicia, who was living in Kingston, Jamaica. He and Alicia began writing to each other and sending pictures. They could not talk on the phone; “that was not a privilege.” Eventually, he proposed in a letter, without ever having met her or heard her voice. When she accepted, he bought her a gown and a ring and made his way back to Jamaica, where they were married a week later.

When I expressed my surprise at their long-distance courting, Alicia was quick to remind me that they have been married for 57 years. She explains, “You get to know someone better by writing back and forth. When you have something to say to someone, even if they are in the next room, write it down. You have to think through it as you write it, so it is better than just speaking to each other.”

Working wood blind

After his vision was gone completely, Hansel became involved with The Connecticut Institute for the Blind (Oak Hill) to help him transition to living without his sight. They offered to supply Hansel with some wood-working tools and machines, on the condition that he learn to use them safely. So Hansel attended The Carroll Center for the Blind, in Newton, MA, which helps the blind achieve independence through rehabilitation and educational services.

There, Hansel took a course on the safe use of woodworking machinery. Hansel told the staff at the Center that he had heard it is possible to cut circles on a table saw, and he wanted to

learn how. They taught him that—and much more. Shortly after the course, a truck arrived at the Collins’ house with machinery: a table saw, lathe, drill press, bandsaw, and more.

Hansel began to produce wooden kitchenware and sell it at the B&B. He uses local hardwoods, such as cherry and maple. Spoon and fork blanks are cut on the table saw. The tines of large forks are created with the workpiece standing vertically at the table saw, held against a miter gauge. Then he takes the work to his carving bench, where he hand-shapes each piece using carving chisels, rasps and files, and a variety of handplanes. Finally, the work is hand-sanded and mineral oil applied.

Showing me around his shop, Hansel dons a heavy work apron and ties the strings behind him. He sits at the carving bench and demonstrates the sanding of a large spoon. His right hand sands with rapid motion, then his left hand darts in to evaluate the result. The confidence of his movements shows it is a well-orchestrated and well-practiced process.

At the lathe, Hansel primarily makes bowls and plates to complement his line of wooden kitchen items. Although he received some education on safely using other tools and machines, he taught himself how to use the lathe without ever having used one prior to becoming blind. He had seen lathes in action; his brother was a wheelwright who made spindles on improvised, hand-cranked lathes erected in the forest, so he understood the concepts.

Unlike his brother, Hansel has the benefit of using a modern Delta lathe

with a heavy floor-standing toolrest. The headstock is angled and moved to the center of the ways so he can turn larger-diameter pieces. He has a small block of wood clamped to the toolrest that he uses as a guide for presenting his cutting tool. With the lathe off, he positions the tool and verifies its distance from the workpiece. Then he turns the lathe on and slowly advances the cutting tool into the spinning wood. After the piece has taken shape, he proceeds with sanding, also at the lathe, and works through to a fine polish. Finally, he applies a coat of mineral oil.

When I first heard of Hansel Collins—a 90-year-old blind woodworker from Jamaica—I thought I would interview him and just focus on the story of his craftwork. But, as it is with many woodworkers, the craft is part of a larger story. During our brief interview, I saw that there is much more to Hansel’s rich, remarkable life—his family, his work ethic, his gracious and persistent style. I was inspired just meeting him. So it seems fitting that now, with all of their children grown and on their own, Hansel and Alicia welcome people from around the world into their B&B to continue sharing themselves and extending their incredible legacy. ■

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To learn more about the 7C Herb Garden B&B, visit 7cherbgarden.com.



A selection of Hansel’s craftwork, mostly in cherry and maple.



Prior to turning on the lathe, Hansel uses his fingers to gauge the position of his cutting tool in relation to the wood.



Hansel and Alicia Collins, owners of the 7C Herb Garden B&B, New Preston, CT.