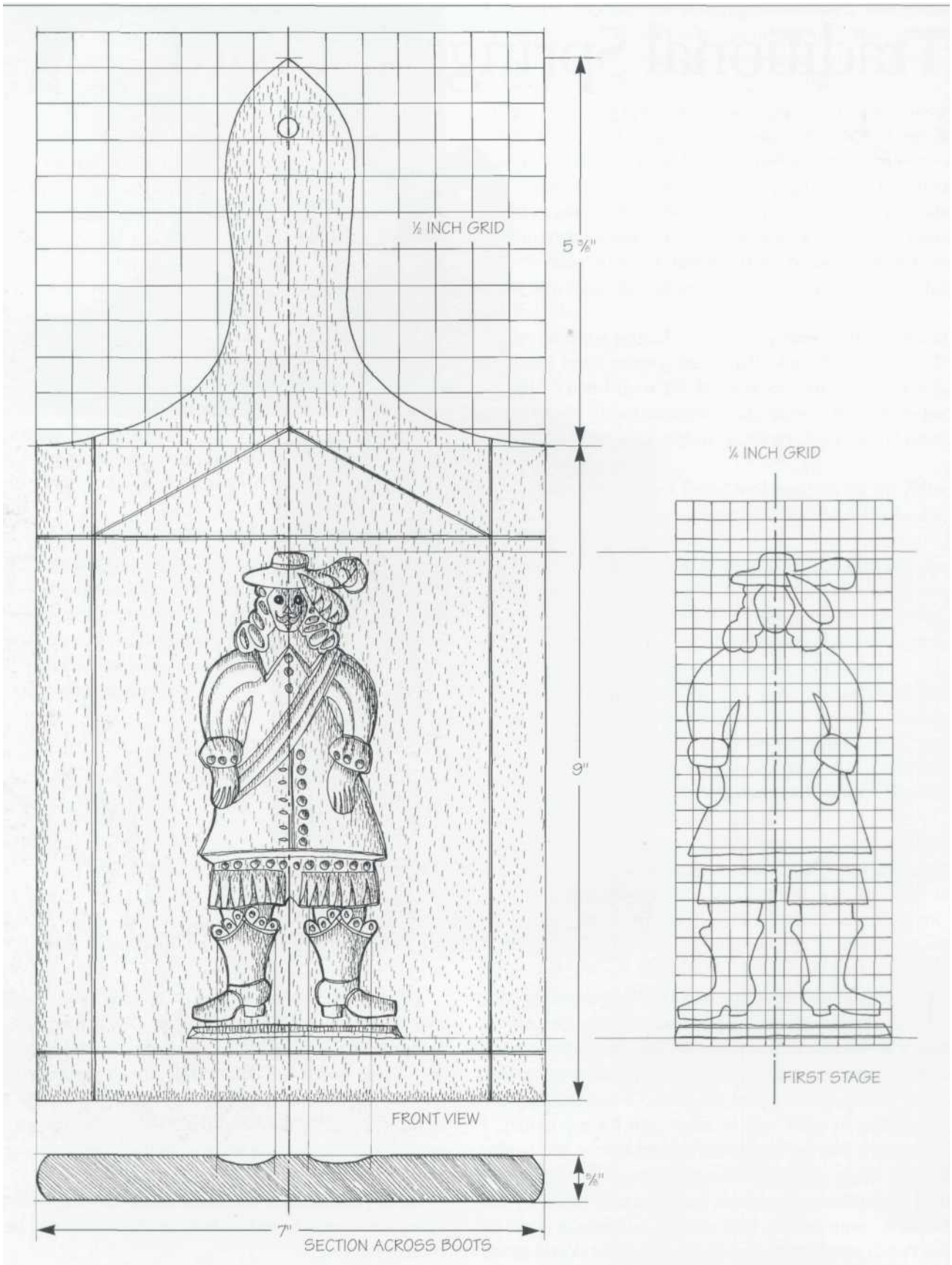
Traditional Springerle Board

The American Colonial kitchen or "keeping room" was an absolute treasury of fine woodwork. There were butter bowls and salt trays, boxes and knife racks, pipe-shelves, cutting boards, tables and chairs, all of them variously carved, pierced and detailed. Of course, they are all exciting in some way or other, but for my money, I particularly like the beautifully carved biscuit and cookie boards. There were shortcake molds made by the English and Scottish communities, breadboards made by the Swedish communities, little stamps and presses made by the Polish immigrants. Just about every Old World group had a unique style, form and tradition of carved boards.

Of all these "mother country" woodenwares, the German American Springerle cookie boards are perhaps the most delicate and fanciful. Every early Pennsylvania German home had them. The cookie dough was rolled thin and the carved hardwood board was pressed onto it to imprint the designs. When the cookies were baked, the resultant raised designs and motifs made an attractive table arrangement.

So if you like the notion of basic carving, and you know someone who enjoys baking, then this could be the project for you.


½ INCH GRID
5 ⅞"
9"
FRONT VIEW
⅝"
7"
SECTION ACROSS BOOTS
¼ INCH GRID
FIRST STAGE

MAKING THE SPRINGERLE BOARD

This is the perfect project for nervous beginners who are looking for an easy way into the craft of woodcarving. All you need is a flat board, a bench clamp or holdfast, a V-section gouge, a straight gouge, a small spoon gouge, a sharp knife and a steel safety ruler, and you are ready to begin.

Trace the design on a slab of well-prepared, close-grained hardwood. We have chosen beech, but you could just as well go for plum, pear, sycamore or maple. Then carefully pencil-press transfer the primary lines of the design through to the wood. Next, cut out the shape of the board on a scroll saw and rub the edges down to a good finish. This done, secure the workpiece flat-down with the clamps or holdfast and use the spoon bit tool to scoop out the primary elements of the design. Don't try for any great depth, just settle for nice round depressions. It's all pretty easy, as long as you are careful that the tool doesn't dig too deeply into the gram and/or skid across the wood. Continue working with a controlled action, holding and guiding the tool with one hand and pushing, scooping and maneuvering with the other until you have achieved what you consider is a good strong design. You need to dish out the hat, the hair, the face, the coat and cuffs, and the boots. Being mindful that the design is in reverse, try to judge the depth of the carving so that the fullest part of the design has the deepest hollows. Aim to scoop out the little dips and hollows to a depth of about 1/4". Don't dig the tool too deep or try to lever the tool, but rather work with a delicate scooping and paring action. Cut across the grain wherever possible. Remove only small curls of wood and try to keep the carving crisp and controlled. If you feel at any time that the tool is cutting roughly, then approach the grain from another angle or sharpen the tool with a few strokes on the stone and leather. Bear in mind that each and every hollow needs to be worked smoothly—no rough surfaces or undercuts. It's a good idea from time to time to test out your carving by taking a piece of Plasticine and pressing it into the cut shapes, just as if you were pressing dough on the board. Once you have considered the shape and detail of the pressing, you can adjust your work accordingly. Ask yourself as you are working, could the little dips be deeper? are the shapes nicely rounded? and so on.

With the basic pattern in place, take the very smallest spoon gouge and scoop out the little dips that go to make up the small dot and dash details of the buttons and eyes.

Next, use your knives to cut in the fine details. For example, you need to cut in the features, the sash and belt, the tassels around the top of the boots, and so on. And of course, if at any time along the way you want to cut in pockets or bigger plumes or other details, then follow your fancies. Finally, use the knife *or* V-tool to cut in the simple frame shape.

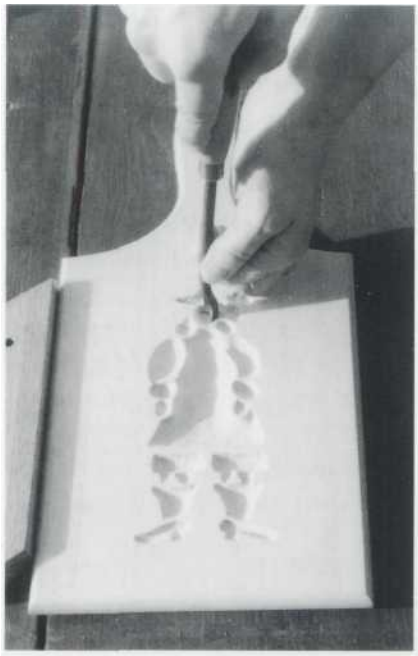
MATERIALS LIST

A Board (1)	5/8″×7″×15″—a piece of prepared wood like beech is best

Note that all measurements allow for a small amount of cutting waste.

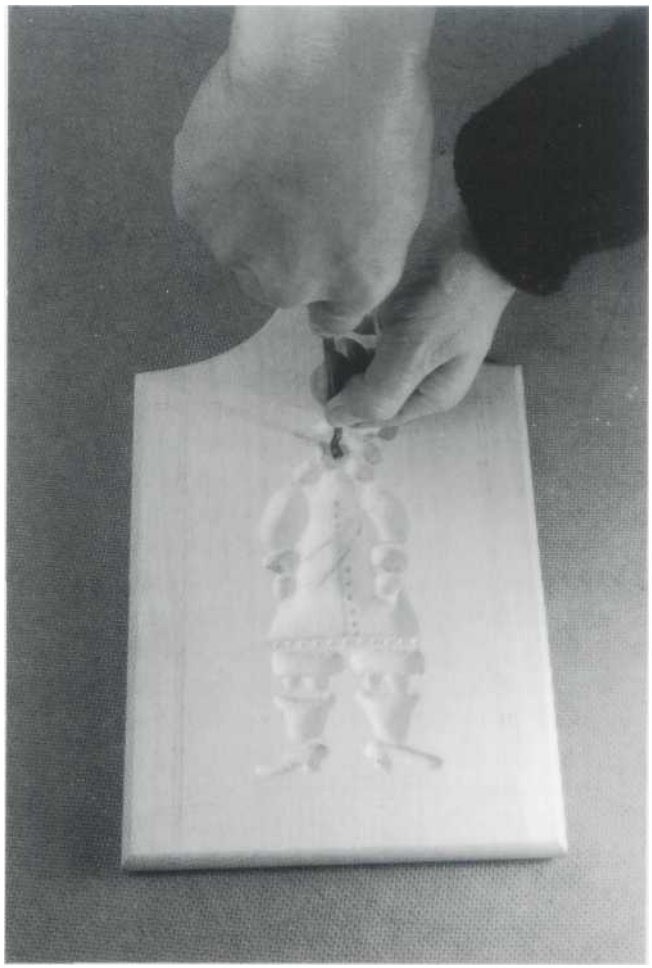
STEP-BY-STEP STAGES

1 Go over the transferred lines with a soft pencil and then spray with pencil fixative to prevent



2 Use one of your spoon bent gouges to scoop out all the little hollows and depressions that will make up the design.

3 If the shape of the depression permits, cease with the spoon bit and change to using the straight gouge. You will find that the straight tool allows you to get a bit more weight behind the thrust.

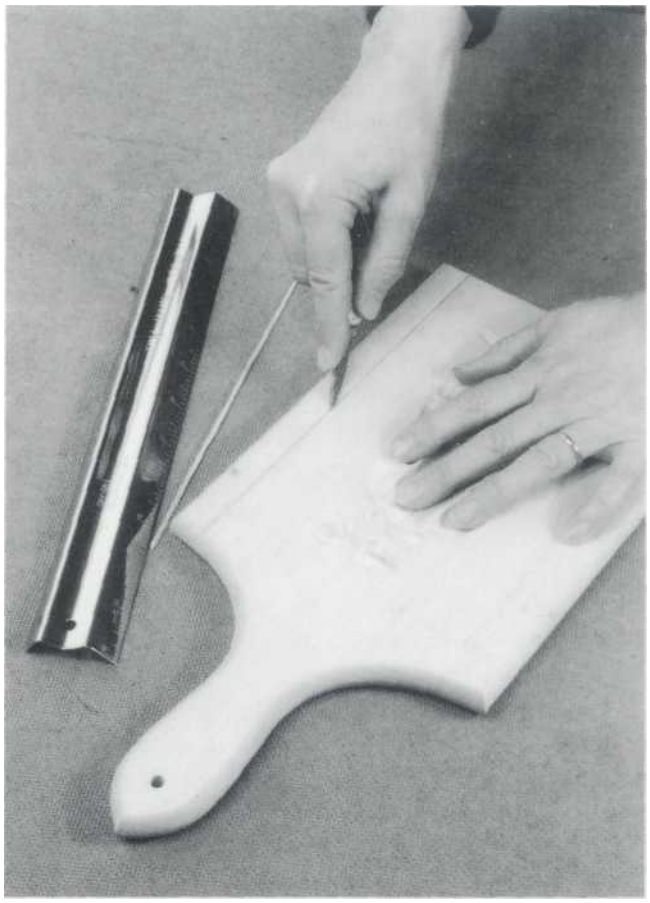


4 Use the smallest spoon bit gouge to "winkle" out the small dot-and-dash details of the eyes and trim. Stab the tool down vertically and twist it on the spot so that it "drills" out a pocket of waste.

SPECIAL TIP

If you find that your tools are cutting roughly, the chances are that the wood is damp or unsuitable or the tools are blunt and need sharpening. The best way to work is to set yourself a rhythm. That is, spend a lew minutes carving and a few minutes standing back and assessing your progress, and then a few minutes rubbing the bevel of the knife or chisel on the fine stone, and so on. If you do this, the work will move along smoothly, with the carving being nicely considered and the tools kept at maximum sharpness.

5 Use the knife to cut the tassel details. Make three cuts for each tassel—a deep stabbing horizontal stop-cut to define the width of the tassel, followed by two downstrokes to clear the waste from the triangular pocket.



6 Use the steel safety ruler and the knife to cut the V-section frame detail. Each line is made with three cuts—a single straight-down stop-cut to define the depth of the V, followed by two angled cuts to clear the waste.

CHOOSING AND USING WOODCARVING TOOLS

There are so many woodcarving tools on the market that beginners are often bewildered when it comes to buying gouges and chisels. For example, I have just looked through a handful of current catalogs and I see hundreds of slightly different tools to choose from. Maybe you aren't going to need more than a handful of tools, but the big problem is which ones to buy.

The first question you have to ask yourself is what do you have in mind to carve? Are you excited about the notion of carving huge sculptural pieces? Or do you fancy caning intricate little birds? Or do you just want to try your hand at traditional flatwork like chip or relief carving, the sort of carving that you see on furniture?

When you decide on your area of woodcarving—sculptural, relief designs, miniatures or whatever—it's best to buy a modest starter kit of, say, four tools. For example, you might get a couple of straight gouges, a V-tool and a bent gouge. Of course, once you actually start carving, the whole problem sorts itself out. You will soon discover that certain tricky details simply cannot be worked, or that you can't carve an undercut or some other detail with any one of your four tools. Then you have enough knowledge to buy a tool of a shape and size to suit. When I first started carving, my favorite tool was a medium-size, shallow-curve straight gouge—it still gets used more than any other tool. So you might start out with the four tools, and everything will be fine and dandy, until the time comes when you need to use a fishtail or a smaller spoon gouge, or yet another size straight gouge .. . and so the fun begins.

All that said, the single thing that bothers most beginners is that they are confused when it comes to the names and the numbers of woodcarving tools. If you don't know what I mean, look at various woodcarving tool catalogs.

From one manufacturer to another, there are all manner of descriptions that relate to the same tool types. Some manufacturers use letters and numbers, some use their own prefix codes, and so forth.

If you are a beginner and still undecided as to the correct gouges for your starter kit, then try the following method—it may help. Start by determining the width of blade you need. Let's say that you have chosen a *V2"* width. Next, consider the hollow or sweep of the blade. Ask yourself, do you want a shallow sweep or do you want a deep U-section sweep for bowls and such? Finally, decide on the profile or shape of the blade along its length. For example, do you want a straight blade or a curved or spoon bent? Once you have sorted out the blade width, the shape of the sweep and the profile of the blade, then all you do is walk into the store and point a finger.

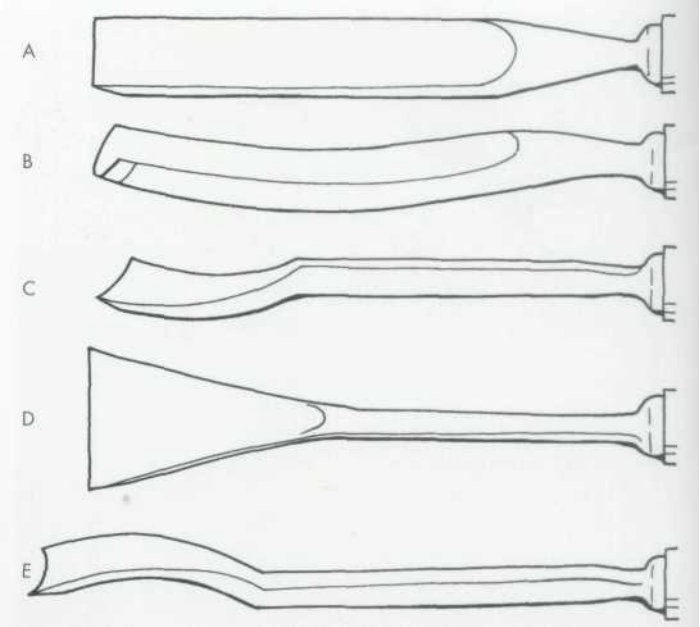
STRAIGHT CHISELS AND GOUGES

If you are still confused as to terms, the following glossary will show you the way.

Straight Chisel—A straight chisel is a flat-bladed tool that has a straight cutting edge. If you jab the cutting edge into the wood, it will leave a straight cut, like a dash. The term "straight" relates to the shape of the blade along its length. The size of the chisel is determined by the width of the cutting edge. In use, the chisel is held in one hand and then either pushed or struck with a mallet. ***Straight Gouge***—Though the straight gouge is straight along its length—just like the straight chisel—the blade is hollow-curved in cross section. If you stab a gouge into the wood, it makes a curved cut, like a C or U. The shape of the curve is termed the "sweep." So when you are ordering a gouge, you need to know the width of the blade and the shape of the sweep. In use, the straight gouge is either pushed by hand or struck with a mallet.

CURVED OR BENT CHISELS AND GOUGES

Having established that the term "straight" describes the shape of the blade along its length, it follows that the terms "curved" or "bent" also describe the blade along its length. For example, you might have two gouges that make identical cuts, the only difference being that one is straight along its length and the other curved or bent. They make the same cut, but the bent tool allows you to hook and scoop into hollows that the straight tool is unable to reach. Spoon bent, fishtail and back-bent tools are simply gouges that are more extremely shaped along their length. So, if you want the cutting edge of your gouge to be a certain width and sweep, you have to make a decision as to the shape of the blade along its length. Do you want a straight blade for heavy pushing or mallet work, a bent one for digging out a shallow bowl, a spoon shape for scooping out deep hollows, or a fishtail for cleaning out tight corners?



CURVED OR BENT CHISELS AND GOUGES

(A) *Straight chisel; (B) deep sweep curved gouge; (C)* shallow *sweep spoon bent gouge; (D) shallow sweep fishtail gouge; (E) shallow sweep backbent gouge.*

Handles—Once you have decided on the width of the blade, the size of the sweep—meaning the shape of the C section—and the shape of the blade along its length, then comes the choice of the handle. There are turned hardwood handles, plastic handles, handles with and without ferrules, and so on. I personally prefer the "London" pattern of turned and shaped octagonal boxwood handles on three counts. They are comfortable to hold, they look good, and best of all, the octagonal section prevents the tool rolling about or falling off the bench and doing damage.