

Richard Gurnee, Taxidermist Extraordinaire

Article & Photos by Watch Docent Bill Best

One of the first things that always catches my breath as I enter the Watsonville Educational Resource Center (WERC) is a gray fox that looks like it's going to leap right off the counter. The exquisite hand that turned the gray fox, red-tailed hawk, long-tailed weasel, and many other specimens at the WERC from road kill to rebirth is Richard Gurnee's. Simply put, Mr. Gurnee is a local treasure!



Richard Gurnee in his workshop with freeze dried waterfowl.

He is a second generation Watsonvillian. His father and brother were dentists, and he might have chosen to follow the family occupation except for his early fascination with animals. At age 11, he earned his Boy Scout Merit Badge in Taxidermy; from ages 13 to 16, he was preserving mammals and birds for local hunters.

Mr. Gurnee attended Humboldt State College where he majored in zoology. While taking a course in microbiology that he learned about freeze drying, in this case microscopic specimens. He wondered if this knowledge could be applied to animals. While working on his Master's Degree at U.C. Berkeley and as a part time taxidermist in Oakland, he built a freeze drying unit large enough to preserve small birds to test his theory. A pioneer in this field, he corresponded with a prominent doctor on the east coast about the science of freeze drying. Impressed with this young man's experience and knowledge, Doctor Berryman recommended him for a job with the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D. C. While there, he refined his technique working on squids, octopi, and crabs, but he yearned to return to his first love, land-based animals.

Not finding an opportunity there for his passion, he returned to Watsonville six years later and established Freeze Dried Taxidermy in 1966. (Washington's loss was Watsonville's gain!) Since that time, Mr. Gurnee has established a national reputation doing educational and museum-quality work out of his small shop. His walk-in freezer of his own design is about the size and dimensions of a big hot tub that would accommodate six to eight people (if your idea of a good time is to be cryogenically frozen). But it can and does accommodate the many snakes, lizards, and game birds which filled its niches when I visited.

Mr. Gurnee combines the art of supporting and posing animals using internal and external wires and struts with the science of extracting all the moisture out of them with a subtle and exacting freeze drying technique. His aim is to "pose these animals in a handsome attitude that shows them off and makes them as life-like as possible." He succeeds wonderfully! Just look at his great horned owl flying above the diorama at the WERC and see if it's not about to swoop down and take the ground squirrel right out of the case!



Gurnee loads up the freeze drier

Mr. Gurnee, a widower, loves his work and says proudly that "It will outlive me." He says that "it is very unusual to find something so early in life that can hold your interest for a lifetime." He feels that his work "can help teach people about the interrelationship of animals with the environment," and he particularly enjoys "preserving animals that people don't ordinarily see."

"People are always welcome to my shop," Mr. Gurnee concludes, which is chock full of those unusual specimens. If you're lucky when you go, you'll be invited to poke around the back of the shop where the freezer is and the real work is done. I think that you'll find, as I did, that Mr. Gurnee is as rare and delightful as his life's work!

Freeze Dried Taxidermy is located at 381 E. Lake Dr. in Watsonville, next to the car wash.