

## Harold Whiting and His Tin Can Men Deborah Stone

Looking for Harold Whiting? You can usually find him at the dump about 1 o'clock on Sunday, standing next to the tin can recycling crib. He is searching out the perfect cans for his most unusual and most delightful hobby – making tin can men.



You have probably seen Harold's tin can men around town, or perhaps you have one hanging from your porch. Harold makes them in two sizes: the little guy and the big guy. And then there's the occasional giant guy, about the size of a three-year-old, of which he has made just a couple for special orders. Whatever their size, they all have a smile on their lips, roofing screws for eyes, a funnel for a hat, three buttons made out of beer caps, and a big red heart. They may all be made out of the same kind of cans, but they're all cute as a button– I mean a beer cap– and each one has its own personality.

On the day I visited with Harold at the dump, he brought a giant one to show me and had it sitting in the passenger seat of his van. A woman came up and said, "You should put these two big ones together and then it will look like they had children with the two little ones." It's easy to fantasize about the tin men and give them life stories.

How does an old can become a tin man? Harold is peering down into the recycle bin with a grabber in his right hand. He knows exactly what kinds of cans he is looking for. A gallon popcorn can serves as the belly for the big guy, a quart tomato can for the little guy. A tunafish can makes the big guy's neck. The little guy doesn't have a neck. Harold

places a tomato paste can slightly inside a soup can and shows me how they form the arm for the big guy.

The little guy is made of smaller cans, naturally. He has a soup can for a head, and not only does he lack a neck, he doesn't get "knee" and "elbow" joints, either. The little guy's arms are just one tomato paste can. Each of his legs is made of a small pineapple juice can, because they are a little bit longer than a tomato paste can. Today Harold has scored a lot of little legs. The road agent, Darrell Simoneau, has brought him two cartons of pineapple juice cans, Darrell's favorite drink. Everyone, it seems, is enchanted by Harold's tin men.

The tin men's feet are very important so they can stand, well, on their own two feet. "They're supposed to stand up, but they're just like kids," Harold says, as he props up a couple on the floor of his van to show me and they promptly fall over. The big one's feet are made of rectangular sardine cans. The small one's feet are shod with dainty round cat food cans.



Not only does Harold know exactly what sizes and shapes he is looking for. He is picky about other things, too. If it has a rim on the inside, he can't use it. He spots a can that catches his fancy— Snap! – up comes the can in his pincer. Flip! – he deftly tosses it and catches it with his left hand. He inspects the can. "If they're dirty, I don't take 'em. If they're anywheres near clean, I use soap and water." If the can in his hand passes muster, he whips out his pocketknife and with two quick strokes, scrapes off the label. "Bean cans are good," he tells me. "Not too much glue on the label." If the label doesn't come off clean, he tosses it back in the bin.

Back home in his garage is where he sets up shop, except in winter, when production takes place in the basement. The cans go together with wire, sheet metal roofing screws, and an electric screwdriver. Once the body is together, Harold hangs it from a ladder and spray paints it with the Rustoleum, usually silver or gold, because those are

the colors people like best. When the paint is dry comes the fun part – the buttons and the heart. Harold favors Budweiser caps because they are red. (They are not from his own consumption; people save them for him.) If he runs out of Budweiser caps, he uses other kinds and paints them either red or blue.

To make the heart, he takes the thin top of a cat food can, folds it in half "like we used to make valentines in school," and cuts out the heart with a tin snippers. The buttons and the heart go on with roofing screws, too.

In case you're wondering how this quintessentially American folk art came to Lempster, *The Historian* did a little research. Tin can men were inspired by the "Wizard of Oz" film that premiered in 1939 with Judy Garland. About ten years ago, Suzanne Kelley got the idea from a friend in New York and brought directions back to Lempster and shared them with her friend Beverly Whiting. She and Bev each made one to start. Bev said to herself, "This is so much fun," and pretty soon she was making them for all her kids and grandkids. Her kids saved cans for her. Harold was working at the transfer station then, and he brought home cans, too. Eventually Bev had to give up making tin can men because she was having trouble with her hands.

Harold took up the hobby four years ago. Two years ago he tried to give it up but the tin can men called to him. So did his fans. The little men are in high demand at Old Home Day and other Lempster fairs. So happily, Harold's back at it.

Next time you're about to toss an empty can into your recycle bin, maybe you will give it an extra good rinse and a smile as you imagine it becoming part of a tin can man with a big red heart.