



Joe Hlafka with a pair of his brass-headed walking sticks.

The Sun/Weyman Swagger

# 'Nightstick Joe': guaranteed hobby

By John Kelly

Joe Hlafka gives a lifetime guarantee with every nightstick he sells. If you bash someone over the head with it and it breaks, he'll replace it free. That's how sure he is of the quality of his work.

Joe Hlafka — "Nightstick Joe" to dozens of friends and acquaintances — is a squat, heavy-set, 45-year-old city policeman who has turned a hobby, woodworking, into a lucrative, part-time business.

Working in wood shavings up to his ankles in the basement of his South Baltimore row house, he turns out everything from nightsticks and walking sticks to children's toys and puzzles — all of which he sells at bargain basement prices.

He charges \$20 (plus tax), for example, for one of his walking sticks. But he estimates it costs him almost \$16 to make it — and that doesn't include his labor.

Similarly, he sells nightsticks that he says cost him "about \$10 or \$12 to make" for \$17 (plus tax).

Why? Because he's not in it for the money.

"It's a hobby, something I do after work to unwind," he says. "Some people like to go out and have a couple of beers. Me, I like to come home and make things. That's how I relax."

Besides, he thinks it's immoral for anyone to make a huge profit.

"My father always told me, 'If you serve the masses, you'll eat with the masses.' I believe that. I try to concentrate on volume, and that way I'm able to keep my prices low and still make a few dollars myself."

Most of Mr. Hlafka's (it's pronounced "Lafka," as if the "H" was

silent) nightsticks are sold by word of mouth to individual policemen or to police supply houses — some as far away as Florida and Texas.

The nightsticks are heavier and sturdier than regulation nightsticks (they weigh 12 1/4 to 14 ounces) and they cost about \$10 more. But "they're superior to anything that's mass-produced," Mr. Hlafka says, and they "meet all police standards."

They're made from purpleheart, a durable, purple-colored wood grown in the South, or bubinga, a strong West African wood similar to rosewood.

For civilians, including the elderly, who want canes that also can be used for protection, there are custom-made "Nightstick Joe" Hlafka walking sticks, longer and thicker than nightsticks, and much more elaborate.

The handles are brass (usually in the shape of an animal head) and intricate diamond, spiral or fluted designs are carved (with a router) into the shafts.

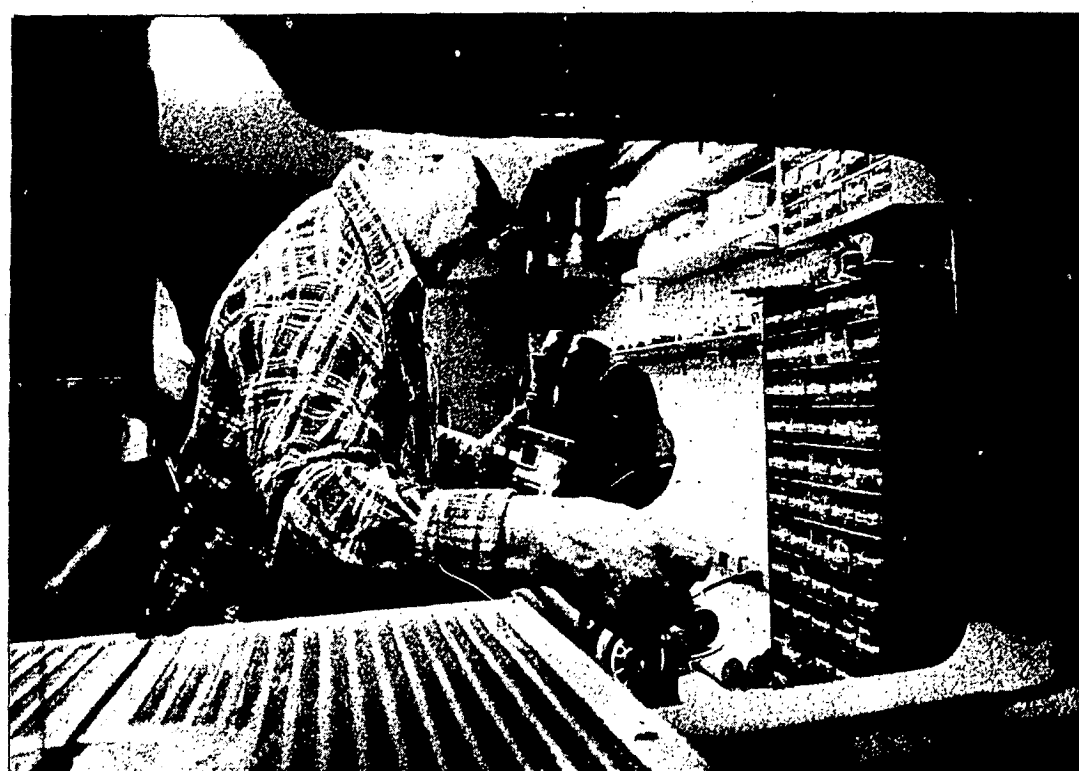
Both the walking sticks and the nightsticks are soaked in linseed oil, dried and then sealed with polyurethane to protect them from moisture, which is "the enemy of wood."

So, oddly enough, is rain — or the lack of it.

"A poor rainy season can slow a tree's growth and create weak spots in the wood," Mr. Hlafka claims. He says the weak spots are not always noticeable, and the wood may break if it hits something hard enough.

"I've tested the nightsticks with a hydraulic gauge, and I can apply 110 pounds of pressure per square inch before the purpleheart cracks. The

See NIGHTSTICK, D2, Col. 1



Framed in a band saw, Joe Hlafka works with a router mounted on a guide.

The Sun/Weyman Swagger



A captain whittled by Joe Hlafka.

The Sun/Weyman Swagger



The Sun/Weyman Swagger

Joe Hlafka turns walking stick on a lathe; finished ones hang nearby.

"bored" making nightsticks. His first effort was a wooden pull-train. It turned out to be an excellent choice.

The little five-car trains (engine, coal tender, boxcar, tanker car and caboose) are probably his most popular toy. They're gobbled up by appreciative parents almost as fast as he can make them.

Small wonder. He sells them for \$25 — about half what comparable trains cost in most toy stores, Mr. Hlafka says.

He also makes chunky little tug boats, blocky, old-fashioned cars, models of the famous "black maria" (a police patrol wagon), and an assortment of simple wooden animal puzzles — squirrels, ducks, kittens — ranging in price from about \$5 to \$7.

"Everytime I see something, I think, 'I can do that.' It's fun for me. It's like a challenge to see if I can do it and maybe improve on it. I've always believed the world is limited only by a person's capacity to dream."

Lately, Mr. Hlafka's dreams seem to be getting bigger. He's talking about building furniture. He says he got the idea after he saw a kit for a grandfather's clock advertised in a magazine for \$160. Naturally, he thought the price was too high.

"I can do it for a lot less than that," he says.

For more information call 752-8147

## NIGHTSTICK, from D1

bubinga will take 210 pounds per square inch.

"But if there are weak spots in the wood, they'll crack a lot faster. That's why I guarantee my sticks. You never know when you might get one that's bad."

Joe Hlafka was born and raised in South Baltimore, and has been a policeman for 13 years. He started in the Western District and transferred to the Traffic Division two years ago.

His beat is the North Charles-Saratoga street area, where he's known for his affable good humor.

One of his favorite ploys is to amble along the street, "hawking" parking tickets for drivers whose cars are parked in no parking zones — "a nice gesture," according to one North Charles street merchant who says the policeman "makes his point without offending people."

According to Police Department records, Mr. Hlafka has been shot six times in the line of duty. He was cited a few months ago for his part in foiling a robbery at a Charles Center bank.

He's married and credits his wife, Adella, with "holding the marriage together" for 25 years. "I've always been able to talk to her and discuss things," he says, "and that's helped me handle the stress of police work." The couple has three daughters. A son, Joe, Jr., died a few years ago.

Mr. Hlafka plays trombone in the Baltimore City Police Department dance band, Sounds of an Era, which performs for community groups, and he participates in a federally funded police program to get drunk drivers off the road.

He began doing woodworking when he was 9 or 10 years old.

I joined the police Boy's Club and started making fancy lamps and things. It's something I've always enjoyed doing, but I never sold anything up until a couple of years ago, when I started making police nightsticks."

Since then, he estimates, he's made almost 500 nightsticks and another 200 walking sticks. He's gotten inquiries from cities in France and England.

He started making children's toys a few months ago after he became