

Resident glassblower

In Venable, Rishel fashions tools of research out of glass tubing, years of skill and luck

By SARA BULLARD
Features Editor

Depending on the time of day and the amount of light, Venable Hall can be a strange place. The UNC building is old and filled with antiquated chemistry labs, used primarily for teaching now that Kenan labs were built to house most chemical research. But that research depends largely on the work that goes on in room 15-2 Venable. Jim Rishel has no formal training in science, but the certificate on his wall says he is a scientific glassblower, a member of the American Scientific Glassblower's Society, and one of the few of his profession in the state.

Not much about him seems scientific. He could be a sailor, with his tall muscular build, wavy dark hair and a pipe gripped firmly in hand. He's soft spoken but not reticent or shy. His Yankee accent and dry Yankee wit haven't quite worn off after 13

years in the South.

HE LEANS on a stool before a constant blue flame that jets out from a metal spout. He cranes his neck around several times to light the pipe from the torch. The table in front of him is jammed with broken flasks, tiny coiled-glass condensers, glass vials and other odd-looking artifacts of chemistry. This is Rishel's job—to repair, build or modify the glass instruments of science.

He admits he doesn't know much about chemistry, "but then they don't know much about this end of it either."

It's like we're in two different worlds," the glass maker says of the scientists. "They just come down here with a piece and tell me what they want done, and if it can be done, we do it."

"I like this item right here," He points to a bulky arrangement of tubes, valves and wires. "That's a lamp" (which is the last thing it looks like). "This fellow brought it down

and said that he needed these wires coming through this side." Rishel picks up the lamp and describes how he sealed the wires into the glass.

"Pyrex is the main kind of glass that we use," he says, "but we also have quartz, uranium and cobalt glass for sealing." Different grades of glass are used, depending on what is to be sealed, in order to lessen strain and maintain airtightness.

Rishel lays down the conglomeration and says, "That's one kind of thing we do, but they're always coming in with different problems, because they're all working on different research projects. A lot of it's trial and error, but after a while, you get an idea of what can be done and what can't."

IT'S AN UNUSUAL job for a glass blower, but one only a glass blower can do. "I don't know how many of us there are in the country, maybe 500 or so, but there are only five or six in the state."

Once classified as a blue-collar trade, glassblowing is now recognized by the government as a profession, and according to Rishel's coworker and supervisor, Elwood Schulz, Rishel is at the top of this profession. "He's an all-round journeyman, who can handle anything for the simplest projects of undergraduates to the most intricate items for electronic research."

Rishel learned the trade at a vocational and technical institute in Salem, N.J., near the farm where he grew up. After a year of learning the basics of the art, he spent three years in nearby Vineland, N.J., before moving to North Carolina.

Rishel's large metal work table looks as if it contains the results of his 13 years of cutting, polishing, blowing, drilling and sealing glass at UNC.

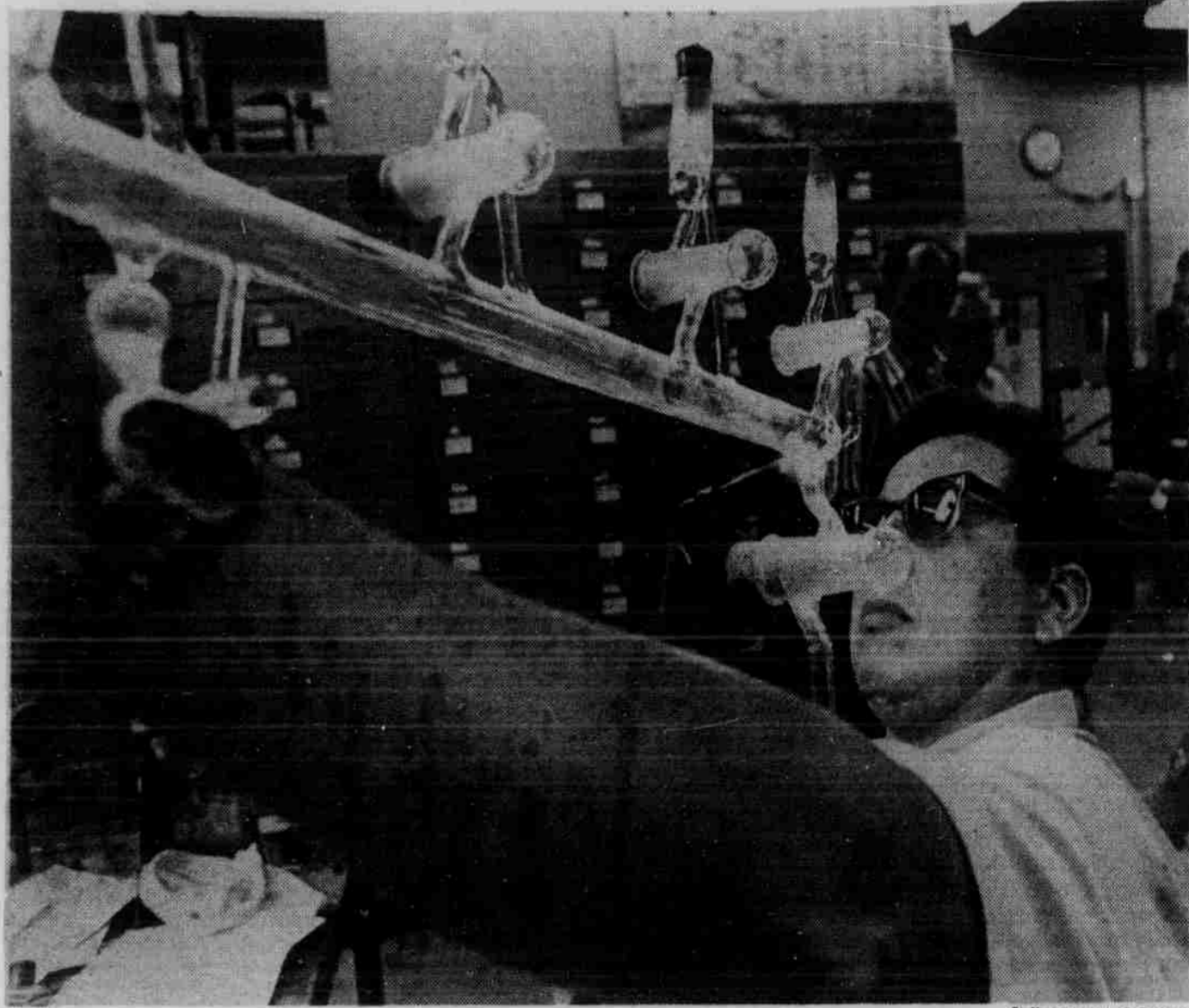
Amid the rubble hidden underneath the tubes and tools are fragments of a glass bird's wings. Rishel shrugs, "Oh, that's just part of an eagle I was working on," and admits that scientific glass blowing isn't the only kind of glass blowing he does. "Yeah, I do the novelties too," he says. "It's not my main business. It's just something every glass blower does." He walks over to a case on the far wall of the shop. "I did all of those." He points to a menagerie of glass horses, birds and ornaments.

ONE FIGURE stands out above the rest—a hollow unicorn with a very elaborate mane and tail and one foot raised. "That one turned out okay," he decides with the tone of a judge reviewing the entries in a contest.

The unicorn, he explains, was done for a doctor who gave him a picture of the animal and said he wanted one like it. He worked on the unicorn for four hours and had it mounted on a trophy for the doctor. The one on the shelf he made for himself. "That's the worst one. I gave the good one away."

"I just dabble at it now and again," Rishel says of the artistic side of glassblowing. "I'm kinda proud of that unicorn, but there are fellows who can put me in the shade, if you know what I'm saying."

"I mean, I've seen Cinderella figures with the horse and carriage and everything." He pauses for emphasis. "I mean like this big!"



Staff photo by L. C. Barbour

A professional scientific glassblower, Rishel has been at UNC for 13 years. There are no set methods to his work, he says. "We all work together on a design — sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't."

he says excitedly, arms outstretched. "All in glass. Beautiful. Just beautiful."

Rishel points out a glass merry-go-round on the work table. Hundreds of fine strands of ornately knitted glass threads adorn the top of the carousel, and four small dachshunds are attached. Rishel gives the canopy of glass a light tap and watches it whirl silently. Chuckling softly, he says, "This one's just sitting here getting ripe. A friend of mine made it down here in about 25 minutes. I thought I'd look it over and try to do one later. I can do it except that fine knitting on top."

A STUDENT ASSISTANT, "Hoppy" Cassidy, who Rishel jokingly says "can't do much in the way of making anything but loves to break things up," prods the master into demonstrating his talents. After a little coaxing and aw-shucks modesty, Rishel walks slowly over to a wall filled with shelves of glass tubing ranging from two to 178 millimeters in diameter.

He draws one tube with a diameter a little bigger than a toilet-paper roll and another very small one. Coming back to the work table he slides on a pair of red-tinted protective glasses and lays down his pipe. He adjusts the valve on the metal spout of the torch, and the soft blue flame becomes a gushing fire. In five minutes the glass tubing becomes a swan.

Occasionally looking up as he works, Rishel explains that "everything starts from tubing of some sort." Getting a piece to come out right, he says, is "all in even heating and even turning." He demonstrates by turning the flame up to where it gives off a bright blaze and a sound like running water and heats one small section of the larger tube, turning quickly and constantly. Part of the glass is hidden inside the flame, and as the

glass becomes softer, it looks as if the two ends of the tube are broken apart, and moving independently of each other. Rishel draws the tube out of the fire and blows gently through one end. Like a child's soap bubble, the heated section of the tube bellows out into a perfect sphere.

HE HANDLES the hot glass with a monstrous glove that doesn't look like it should be used to handle anything so delicate. He lays the finished swan casually on the table.

A bright-eyed balding man strolls in and takes a seat at another work table, leans back and smokes a cigarette. He's a machinist from one of the other basement shops. "Hey Jim," he teases, "I've been coming around here for years. How come I never got a swan?"

Rishel winks without turning toward the machinist. "You don't have the right smile." Rishel shyly explains that the swan really didn't turn out just like he wanted it to, that it isn't very good. Despite protests that it is truly a lovely creature, Rishel shrugs away the praise. With a crooked child-like grin he says, "You see, I'm not like Slick here," pointing to the machinist. "He's a ham for that sort of thing."

Rishel tries not to emphasize the artistic side of his work. The novelty items, "catch your eye," he says, but they're more of a hobby than anything else.

THE WORK for chemical research is a lot tougher than creating glass novelty items, he says, but it's also what he does best. "I'm by no means at the top, but I don't have to take second place to too many people."

Rishel stays busy in the glass shop, but he also manages to find the time to hunt and build his own home. Among several photos on the office wall of Rishel blowing glass,

there are pictures of Rishel carrying an unwieldy antelope over his shoulders, Rishel with a cowboy hat and gun, Rishel hammering away on the frame of an unfinished house and Rishel's wife and two kids.

He talks casually about the other things he does. His father got him started hunting when he was growing up on a New Jersey farm. Now he goes all the way to Wyoming on vacation just to hunt for deer and antelope, or "just to sit," he says, "just to kick my feet in the dirt and not have anyone to answer to."

The relaxation and solitude is a part of hunting, he says.

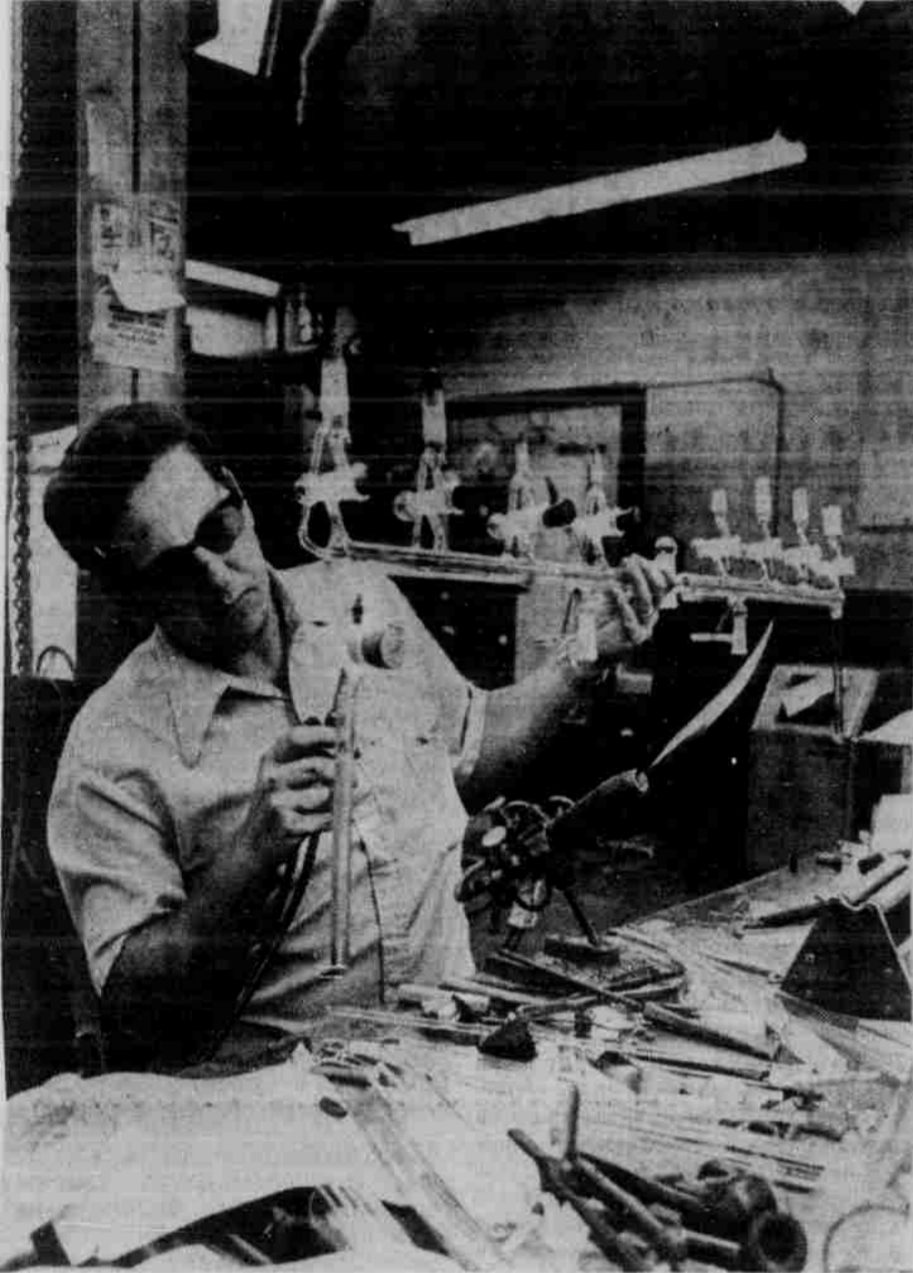
RISHEL IS also building his own home in his spare time, using whatever extra money he can come up with. Two years ago, he says, "I decided I wanted a new house, and the only way I was going to get it was to build it myself."

Rishel had no special knowledge of construction when he started besides helping a friend build his own home. "But, you know, if you set your mind to it that you can do it, that's half of it, right? I just said 'I'll do it.'"

It may seem like an odd combination of activities, but Rishel explains that glassblowing, being raised on a farm and construction are all related. Being in here," he gestures to the glass shop, "teaches you to think. It helps you out, sets you up for these other things, like building the house."

He slides slowly into a wooden swivel chair, and leans back puffing on his pipe and gazing at the photos on the wall.

"I've learned a lot from all of this — the house and everything. But the work I do in this shop is more important than all that. If I had to, I'd trade everything else for this."



Staff photo by L. C. Barbour

Jim Rishel blows, cuts, drills and polishes the glass instruments of chemical research. But sometimes it's hard to tell exactly what it is he's making. Above, he works on a piece to be used for distillation.

Students more campus-oriented than professors

By DAVID STACKS
Staff Writer

Students are less familiar with areas in Chapel Hill away from campus than their professors are, according to a survey conducted by a UNC graduate student in geography.

"Students are more University-oriented because they spend more time on campus," said Jan Brenner, who polled 50 students and 50 faculty members during spring semester, 1977.

"Faculty members are involved in more community activities like the garden club, the golf course and the school their kids go to," Brenner said.

Brenner said her survey showed many people do not know the proper names of common places on campus, such as Polk Place and McCorkle Place.

Polk is the quadrant between Wilson Library and South Building. The McCorkle quad extends from South Building to Franklin Street and includes the Davie Poplar and Silent Sam.

The most attractive places among both students and faculty are the Botanical Garden, Coker Arboretum, Gimghoul Castle, McCorkle Place and the Blue Cross and Blue Shield headquarters.

Students and faculty differed on second and third choices of their favorite places, however. Among the faculty, 12 per cent said the Botanical Garden appealed to them. McCorkle Place and the Chapel Hill Public Library followed with eight per cent each.

In the student population, 18 per cent preferred to be in the Arboretum more than anywhere else on campus. McCorkle Place polled 10 per cent while the Bell Tower and Forest Theatre followed with eight per cent each.

Brenner said the survey showed people prefer to be in areas used for recreational purposes and where there are few man-made developments such as houses and highways.

"Most people cited 'naturalness' as their reason for choosing one area over another," said Brenner, who plans to use the survey results in her master's thesis.

She said her study is important because urban planners would know what environments appeal to people when they plan cities' growth and development patterns.

"Everyone carries an image of the environment in his mind," Brenner said. "Urban planners are becoming more aware of how people feel about their surroundings."

The least attractive places in Chapel Hill

among both students and faculty are Eastgate Shopping Center, Glen Lennox Shopping Center and the Chapel Hill Municipal Building.

The most popular church in terms of physical appearance among both groups was the Chapel of the Cross, while Mason Farm and Eastwood Lake were popular recreation areas. Favorite residential areas included Lake Forest and Westwood.

Some places in Chapel Hill were not as well known as others, the survey reported. Few people were familiar with Cobb Terrace, Tenney Circle or the old law school office.

Cobb Terrace and Tenney Circle are residential areas. The old law school office is on Franklin Street across from the President's residence.

The survey also showed that 80 per cent of the students do not intend to remain in Chapel Hill longer than it takes them to complete their studies, while 88 per cent of the faculty plan to stay indefinitely.

Brenner said her survey implies that having a car does not seem to be a prerequisite to being familiar with the area. She conceded that not inquiring if people had personal automobiles in Chapel Hill is a loophole in her survey, but she said most people responded that bicycles and buses are adequate transportation within the city limits.

Brenner said she restricted her survey to seniors, graduate students and faculty members who have lived in Chapel Hill between three and seven years. She selected her sample at random from the campus telephone directory.

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