Your Guide to the Ultimate Home Game Room

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Slots Come Alive

The art of hand-carved character slots

An interview with Rich DeLong

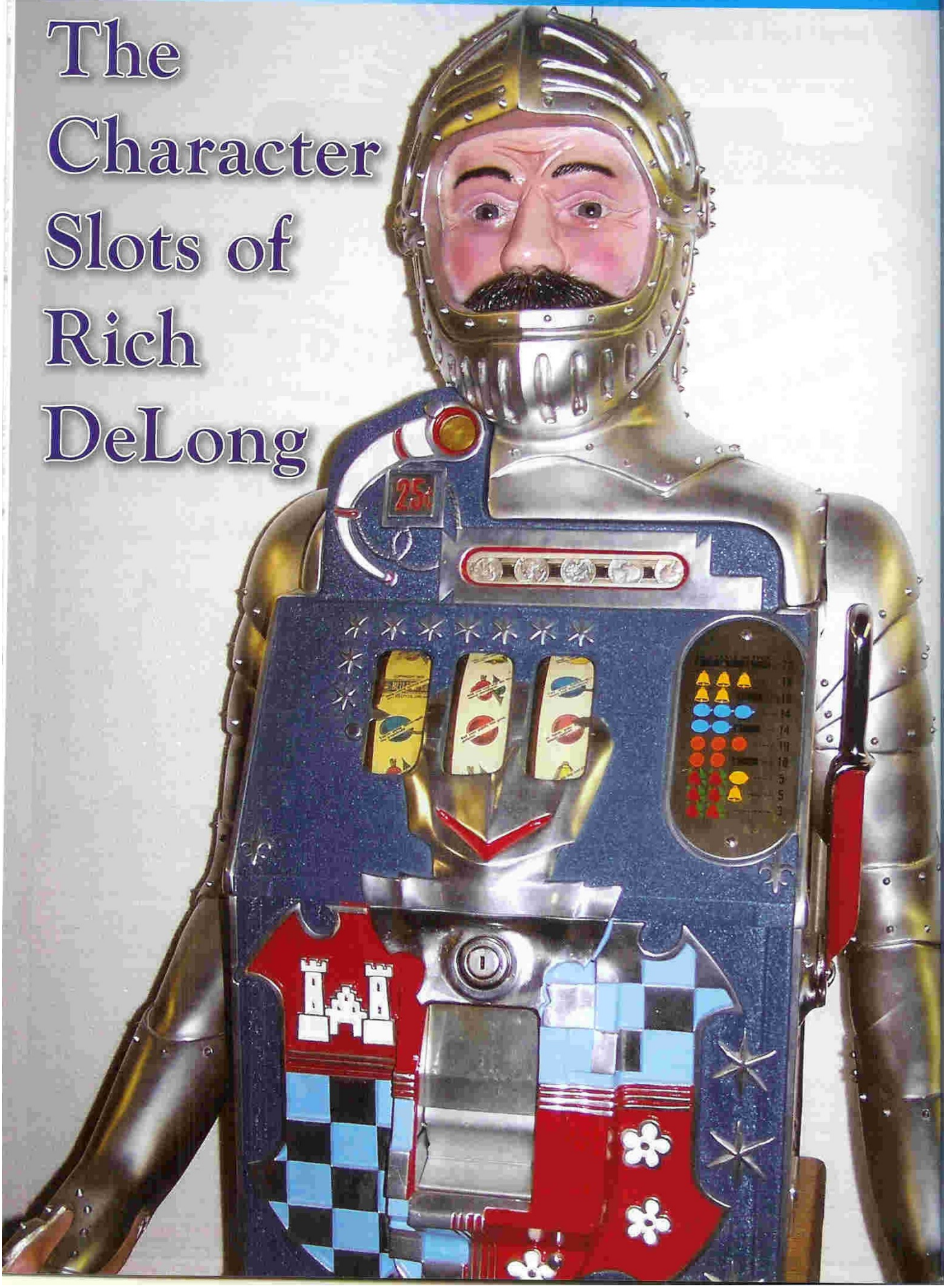
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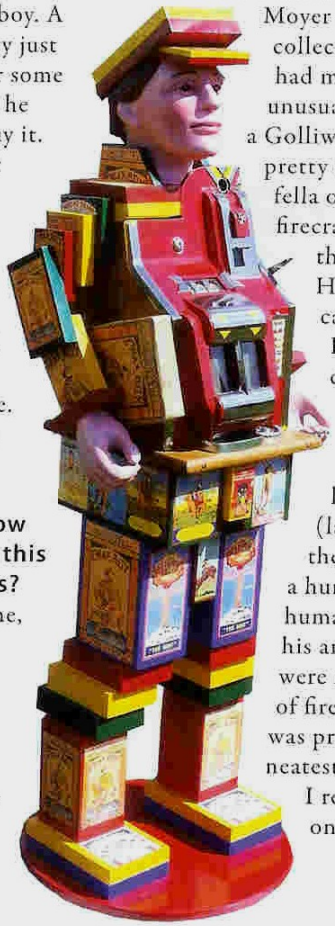
World Pinball Championship

The Character Slots of Rich DeLong



The name Rich DeLong may not ring any bells, but if you've ever walked through a casino and seen some of the gorgeous character slot machines adorning the halls, chances are they were created by him. For over a quarter-century, Rich has carved slot figures from scratch, going through such painstaking measures to ensure a quality product that he's now in danger of having to give up his art. Not only is he a master craftsman, he also repairs and restores vintage slot machines. What many people don't know is that he's also responsible for getting the state of Pennsylvania to legalize the collecting of vintage slots. Rich recently took some time to talk with Scott Voisin about his adventures in the slot world. — Scott Voisin

***Scott Voisin*: How did you first get started making character slots?**
Rich DeLong: I bought some antiques out of a house in 1979, and there was an old postcard that had some of Frank Polk's slot figures on it. When I saw them I thought that it would be pretty nice to make one. I thought I'd make a figure for myself—just to have one—so I carved a cowboy. A guy from New York City just happened to stop by for some slot machine parts, and he saw it and wanted to buy it. I told him I didn't want to sell it, that I made it for myself, and he said, "Why don't you sell me that one and make yourself another one?" I thought I could do that, so I sold it and made another one. That's how I got started on them.



***SV:* When did you know you'd be able to turn this hobby into a business?**
RD: Well, I sold that one, and then the same guy called me a little bit later and asked me if I could make one for a friend of his. I also had a couple of other people see them and it just kind of mushroomed from there. I started to make all different kinds of figures. Instead of just the cowboys and Indians, I made pirates and gangsters and Roman soldiers. Whatever people could dream up, I'd carve them. I enjoy the challenge of somebody sending me a picture of something and trying to carve it, and I've made some really strange ones. There was a guy named George Moyer who wrote a book on collecting fireworks, and he had me carve some really unusual figures. One was a Golliwog, who was a pretty famous little fella on the packs of firecrackers back in the early days. He also had me carve a Crack Boy, which doesn't sound so good in today's language. (laughs) Back then, Crack Boy had a humanistic head and humanistic hands, but his arms, hips and legs were made from packs of firecrackers. That was probably one of the neatest ones I've made, I really liked that one.



***SV:* What's the most bizarre thing someone has asked you to carve?**
RD: Probably the most bizarre one was when this fella wanted me to carve a nun. He wanted to put in a Mills Bursting Cherry slot machine, and he wanted me to have her holding a telephone up to her ear. I told him, "No, I'm not gonna carve something like that. That's a little too sacrilegious." He said, "No, no, it's for my wife. She likes Blue Nun wine and she's always on the telephone, so it's kind of a joke." Since that was the case, I went ahead and made it. There was one time that I did refuse to make a figure. This guy wanted me to make an Indian where you could lift up the loincloth and there'd be a tube where the coins come out! (laughs) I could've made it, but I thought it was best not to. (laughs)

***SV:* Who are some of the celebrities that own your figures?**
RD: A friend of mine from Vegas just called me, and he was visiting Jay Leno, and Leno has a couple of my figures in his house. Some of the other ones I know of are Tanya Tucker, Loni Anderson and



Frank Sinatra. One guy I made one for is John Patrick. He's a professional gambler, and they made a movie about his life. He could beat all of the casinos, so what he did was hire a make-up artist to make him look like somebody else so the casinos wouldn't kick him out. He had a way of pointing at someone with his finger, so I carved that to look like him and it came out really nice.

***SV:* Can you describe the process of creating a slot figure?**

RD: Well, we cut the trees down and then we cut the wood into what they call three-quarter, which is three inches thick. We then put the wood in a kiln and dry it down to six or eight percent. That's the way the cigar store indians and carousel horses were done a hundred years ago. The wood will stay in a kiln for six-to-eight weeks, and we'll take out about five-to-ten gallons of water a day out of the load of wood. After I see the water content coming out, I start testing the wood. You don't want it too dry or it'll dry-rot, and you don't want it too wet or it'll split. That's why it has to be between six and eight percent. We also laminate the wood to keep it under pressure to make sure it doesn't split.

***SV:* It looks like there's an incredible amount of detail on your figures.**

RD: We do a lot of detail work on the head. I carve each individual hair on the head, and that's what has hurt my hands. I've had operations on nine of my fingers plus carpal tunnel in both hands from doing all of that delicate work, but I want it to be perfect. We sand everything down nice and smooth with a fine sandpaper and steel wool, just like you'd restore an old antique car. We prime it, and then I airbrush paint them.

The airbrushing is quite a process because it isn't just one coat. There'll be four or five different coats of paint just on the flesh. I'll mix two or three different colors for the flesh, then I use a darker color for the detail. I'll put a faint blush on the cheeks because that brings life to the subject. After that, I give it a protective coat so you can wash the figure if it gets a smudge and everything's protected. It's a special paint that I use, it's not a paint that makes it look like plastic. It's a special dead-flat paint I discovered. It's not a common paint that you can just go out and buy. Then I put real hand-painted glass eyes in them. Those are special made in different colors like brown and hazel and green. I made a figure one time for a guy of Medusa—the snake lady—and I had a set of snake eyes made for that. That one was pretty neat and came out real nice. I don't much care for snakes but it was quite an interesting project to make. There's a lot of work that goes into installing the glass eyes without scratching them. It's real tedious work but it looks great when it's done.

***SV:* How long does it take to create a figure?**

RD: It's probably about 200 hours or more, and that's not counting the kiln drying of it. By the time you carve everything out and do all of the sanding and painting, then you have to to fit the figure to the slot machine, and they all fit different. We pre-fit everything so a fella from California or from overseas can order one of my figures and he just has to tell me what machine he has. I try to keep an inventory of all the more common slot machines, and I have some of the rare ones, too.

***SV:* On your website, you say that Indians are the most popular figure. Why is that?**

RD: The Indian is such a colorful figure. For the Indians I make, the war bonnets are made special for me by a squaw on an Indian reservation, and they match all the colors on the Mills War Eagle, so it looks really sharp. There's also Indian beadwork on the

cuffs, on the loincloth and on the moccasins. There's also an eagle on the loincloth and moccasins to match the War Eagle slot machine, and I think it's just an awesome looking figure when it's done. It also comes with a real nice peace pipe. I know a guy that sells props to movie studios, and we have some terrific props to go with the figures. For the gangsters we have a machine gun, and cowboys come with specially-made leather holsters and prop pistols.

***SV:* It looks like some of the figures are designed where you have to actually pull the arm of the figure to operate the machine.**

RD: Yeah, we make a pirate that holds a big, long flintlock pistol, and you pull the handle of the pistol to operate the machine. There's an Indian that's holding a Bowie knife, and I've made gangsters that have a Colt .45 automatic that you pull. Those figures are pretty neat when you pull the handle of the weapons to operate the machine.

***SV:* Have you ever made a figure so cool-looking that you had a hard time letting go of it?**

RD: Ever since I started doing this, I look at each one of the figures as my kids. I spend so much time on them and want them to be perfect, and I hate to get rid of them. Last week, I had a lady who came to pick up a rock-and-roll singer she asked me to make. I got on the internet and drew up some legalized adoption papers. I put my name as the judge, and I put on a fancy shipping sticker to make it look like a document seal. I got a nice picture frame to put the paper in, and she really liked that, she thought it was neat. These figures are like my kids, so I'll probably start giving adoption papers with each figure from now on. (laughs)

***SV:* I understand that you were very instrumental in getting antique slot machines legalized in Pennsylvania. How did that happen?**

RD: Well, I always collected antiques, and this one fella had some old guns and old coins at a lumber camp. When I went out there, I saw two slot machines in the bunkhouse. This was 1964 and nobody collected machines at that time that I knew of, and these were the first ones I had ever come across. He wanted $100 for both machines, and I bought them from him. The reason he wanted $100 was because they were full of money and he didn't have the keys for them, and he figured there might be $100 worth of coins in there. So I thought I'd



gamble and I bought them. One was a Mills ten-cent Black Cherry and a Mills nickel Black Cherry. I went home and drilled out the locks, and I ended up getting $28 worth of dimes out of one and $20-something in nickels out of the other. That was a pretty good deal! Anyhow, I started collecting slot machines and had accumulated quite a few. One night, this guy came to the house, and he was a dirty, filthy guy. He always smoked a cigar that stunk up the house, and he couldn't say three words without four of them being the "F" word. He later was arrested for robbing the Baseball Hall of Fame and went to prison, that's the kind of nasty guy he was. Anyway, he came to my house with a friend of his and he said, "Hey, my friend from Philadelphia collects slot machines. Can I show him what you have?" So I took them down to my basement where I kept the machines, and the guy's friend wanted to know if I had any machines to sell. I told him no, but there was an old beat-up one sitting by the door that was busted, and I didn't have any use for it, so I said, "You can have that one, I'll give it to you." The guy said, "No, I'll buy it from you," and I said, "No, you can have it." He insisted on giving me $100 for it, and he said, "I can't take it now, but I'll pick it up in a week or two the next time I'm up this way." About a week later, he calls me and asks if he can come pick up the slot machine. As soon as I invited him in the house, he pulls out his wallet. It turns out he's an undercover agent, and I get arrested.

***SV:* Did you know there would be trouble owning those slot machines?**

RD: At the time, the chief of police was my neighbor and a good friend of mine. I talked to him about owning slot machines, and he said, "Don't worry about it. I know you're not gonna use them for gambling." I talked to a friend of mine who was a lawyer, and he said, "There's no problem." Then I talked to the sheriff—I knew him real well—and he said, "No problem." I was also real good friends with the Deputy Commissioner of the State Police. At the time, he discovered that the governor (Milton Shapp) was involved in some scandal, and Shapp court-martialed him. This was exactly at the same time that I picked up my slot machines. Otherwise, all I would have had to do was call the Deputy Commissioner, and they probably wouldn't have been here in the first place. At the time, there were a lot of raids going on with drugs, prostitution and gambling. Because of the slot machines, my name was brought up.

***SV:* What happened after you were arrested?**

RD: I had thirteen slot machines, and the police pulled into the back of the house and loaded the slot machines up and took me to jail. I was sitting in jail, and these two cops were questioning me. One of them said, "Do you know where more slot machines are at?" I said, "Yes, I do." He said, "Are you gonna work with us and tell us where they're at?" I said, "No. They're not hurting anything. They're just collector pieces, nobody's using them for gambling." He said, "Well, it's against the law to possess slot machines in Pennsylvania." I said, "I wasn't aware of that. I checked before, and I'd like to see in the books where it says they're illegal." The guy says, "Well, you're looking at 5-to-10 years in jail and a $10,000 fine for possession of the slot machines. Now are you gonna work with us?" I said, "No. I'm not gonna squeal on any of my friends that have slot machines." At 2 or 3 O'clock in the morning, they had to arraign me. I was good friends with the Justice of the Peace, and when I walked in there, he said, "Dick, what are you doing here?" I said, "I don't know." He let me off on my own recognizance, and I went home





Rich DeLong (upper left) and Todd DeLong (upper right) pose with some of their favorite creations

that night very upset, naturally. My kids who were in elementary school came home crying just about every day for quite awhile. At the time when this was going on and they were picking up people for drugs and prostitution and gambling, there was my name and picture right in the middle of everything. It was embarrassing to go through that. So I started investigating the legality of slot machines. In California, they were legal for collecting, and in Ohio they were legal for collecting. I got a lawyer but he didn't know where to start, so I had all the information for him. When we went to court, the judge was someone I knew very well. He says, "Will you approach the bench?" So me and my lawyer go up, and the prosecutors go up. The judge looked at the prosecutors and said, "Did any of you fellas go to school?" They started naming the colleges they went to, and the judge says, "No, did you go to elementary where you learned how to read and write?" They said, "Well, yes, your honor." The judge says, "Well, how about reading section 5513 of the Pennsylvania Penal Code for me?" So they read it, and here's what it says: "It is illegal to own, operate, sell, exchange and lease any gambling device with the intent of gambling." The judge says, "Was there any intent of gambling with this man?" The prosecutors had a stack of papers, and they started looking through them. After awhile they said, "No, your honor. There was no intent of gambling." The judge says, "How could you possibly put this man through all of this expense and embarrassment when there's been no crime committed? There was no gambling involved, it's right there in our laws. Case dismissed."

***SV:* Did you get the slot machines back?**

RD: The judge gave a court order to have my machines returned to me. The next day, I took the court order and went down to the state police barracks. I gave it to them, and they said, "No, we're not giving them back. The case is going to the Court of Appeals in Harrisburg." There was nothing I could do except contact my lawyer and try to fight it. During the time the case was in the Court of Appeals, the captain of the state police came up to me and said, "How about you donating those slot machines to the state police?" I said, "No, I'm not gonna give them to you because you're just gonna give them to your friends." He didn't like that. I said, "There's three things I want. Number one, I want my machines back, and there's no reason I shouldn't get them back. Number two, if I can't get them back, I want them sold and I want that money donated to a hospital. And number three, if none of those can take place, then I want to witness these machines being destroyed because I'm not gonna donate them to the state police." He said, "You'll never get them back," and I said, "Well, if I don't get them back then I will watch them be destroyed because you're not gonna give them to your buddies." Three and a half years later, I get a call from the state police. They said, "You can come down and pick up your slot machines. The appeal was decided in your favor." So I went down on Thanksgiving morning and picked them up. The whole ordeal was quite a worriment. For many, many years—and maybe to this day—people thought I was with the mafia and involved in gambling and drugs and prostitution. And the thing of it is is that no law was even broken.

***SV:* You mentioned that you don't know how much longer you can continue carving because of the medical problems with your hands. Are there any plans to have someone take over the business when you call it quits?**

RD: My son Todd works for me part-time, and he's very talented at carving. He's also an expert on doing the repair work and restoration on the slot machines. I know he could probably do it, but he has a regular full-time job. Something like this has no guarantees when you're raising a family. He'll need some security later in life, and I don't know how long the business will last. I can do it—and I enjoy doing it—but I don't have to do it for a living like he would have to.

***SV:* Thanks for taking the time to share your insight, Rich. Any final thoughts you'd like to share with GameRoom Readers?**

RD: I'd just like people to know that I think these are good investments, and anyone thinking about getting one should do it while they're still available. The Frank Polk figures are quite valuable, and mine are so unique. I take no shortcuts and only use the best quality of everything. I make sure they're perfect, and I offer a lifetime guarantee on the work. I'm the only one in the world who's doing this. A good friend of mine made figures years ago, but he had a machine that did them. The machine carved the legs and the arms and the heads, but mine are all handmade. If someone can dream it up, I'll do it. GR