Can Edward Butler talk?
Ask him a question. Go ahead, just one.
About 20 minutes later you have essentially an oral history
of the 81-year-old man.
But Butler is more than talk.
Butler is a promoter of African-American history and gets
his point across by what he does best — talking and
woodcarving.
He fashions pieces of cypress, cedar, mahogany, white pine
and any piece of wood I can find laying around” into the
faces and scenes of African-American history.
Some of the pictures are of Malcolm X, Martin Luther
King, Harriet Tubman, Cicely Tyson and Marcus Garvey.
The creations, though, are not just faces. Butler usually
paints or etches into the artwork a story about the
background of the person or scene depicted. And, if the
history of the subject is not there, just ask Butler about it and
he will tell you everything.
Butler fancies himself a combination history professor-
philosopher-civic activist in his 68th Avenue neighborhood.
People often gather outside his house to watch him turn an
old piece of wood into a slice of African-American history.
“I want people to see my work and have pride about
themselves. I want people around me to love this
neighborhood. I want to be able to teach people
with my artwork,” he said.
Few educators got a chance to teach Butler anything.
He has very little formal education and he didn’t know he had
any artistic talent until he was in his 30s and locked away in
prison.
That’s what also makes Butler special.
Butler was born and reared on an Iberville Parish
plantation. He never finished elementary school.
He said his father’s employer made it difficult — through
low wages and intimidation — for the children to get an
education.
Often, while Butler was walking to school, a landowner
would fire a gun in the air to scare him off the path to school,
he said.
“I asked my father one time, ‘Why don’t we leave this
place?’” he said. But plantation owners in those days did not
look fondly on black workers who left one owner for another.
And Butler had other problems. Because he was usually
older and bigger than his classmates — he was 9 years old
when he started school — “I was never asked to participate
in anything. After a while this works on a kid,” he said.
“I wanted education so badly, but all I could do was dream of
being a judge, lawyer or teacher.”
One teacher, though, cared and gave him encouragement.

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Artist depicts African-American history in wood

By EDWARD PRATT
Advocate staff writer

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“She would comb my hair, put lotion on my face and let me dry my shoes,” he said. “You never forget people like that. I have given her a piece of my art.”

But by the sixth grade, Buller’s dreams collapsed and he dropped out of school to find work to help his family. The education he missed dogged him for years. “I would have trouble filling out applications,” he said. “I couldn’t read very well.”

He got married when he was 17 years old and began a succession of low-paying jobs.

When he was 36 years old, Buller went to prison, where he would spend the next 11 years. For the first two years, Buller did very little there, but one thing he did was watch inmates in the prison hobby shop carve wood.

“It looked interesting to me. I found a piece of wood and I kept it for about three months before I decided to do anything with it,” he said.

After some encouragement from a friend, he got a carving knife and a chisel and carved into the wood a face from a picture.

“It came out almost perfect,” Butler said. “After that I just started doing more and more. I discovered I had a talent.”

The carving soon became therapy for him.

“When you’re in prison there is a lot of pressure on you every minute. There was nothing that took pressure off me like this wood,” he said. “Those first three years (in prison) seemed to take forever. But the next years went like nothing.”

He started churning out piece after piece, mostly about prison life and black history. “I decided that if I didn’t make it home, I wanted people to know I had been here,” he said.

One piece of art that attacked the judicial system riled some security personnel who later tried to make it difficult for Butler to continue his new vocation, he said.

“That’s when I realized what my art could do... that it could say something or make people feel something,” he said.

Now, Butler says he has a thirst for reading and listening to educators.

“I study a lot of black history. I pick out people who are scholars and try to understand what they are talking about,” he said. “You see, I didn’t get the education that I needed. Now I want to get all the education I can.”

One of his goals is to use his artwork to teach black history to school children and to talk to them about staying away from illegal drugs.

He has gotten his chance at such places as Southern University, Southern Laboratory School, Scotlandville Magnet High and Crestworth Middle schools.

“My artwork has gotten me behind doors I would never have gone through otherwise,” he said, beaming. “My art is based in fact. I use it as a credit card to talk to kids about black history and the life of a convict.”

Butler said the public school system does not teach enough African-American history. He says his artwork can be a teaching tool.

“The school system,” he said, “seems afraid to teach black history because they think it will make people mad or cry. But that’s what history is all about.”

Butler said he is not in a hurry to sell his artwork. “I would sell it to someone, if it was somebody who would explain each piece and what it means. Most of it tells a story that no one else can tell but me.”

“When I do a picture of (slave rescuer) Harriet Tubman or (educator) Mary McLeod Bethune, I have to play the part of Harriet Tubman and Mary McLeod Bethune,” he said.

“There are some pieces of art I do that bring tears to my eyes... like the one I did of Emmett Till,” he said. Till, a 15-year-old boy, was beaten to death in Mississippi in 1955 because he allegedly whistled at a white woman.

“I really feel what I do. You have to feel this,” he said, pointing to the artwork that lines the walls of his home. “This is me, now.”